

MELVIN B. TOLSON: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

By

NEVA JOY FLASCH

Bachelor of Arts in Education
Southeastern State College
Durant, Oklahoma
1951

Master of Arts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1954

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College
of the Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
May, 1969

Thesis
1970
F845m
copy

Copyright by
Neva Joy Flasch
1969

SEP 29 1969

MELVIN B. TOLSON: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Thesis Approved:

Samuel H. Woods, Jr.
Thesis Adviser

[Signature]

Clenton Keller

Leon S. Munson

Bernard R. Belden

N. D. Durham
Dean of the Graduate College

724832

PREFACE

This dissertation is a critical analysis of the works of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, Afro-American poet who was poet laureate of Liberia from 1947 until his death in 1966. Though his three books of poetry--Rendezvous With America (1944), Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (1953), and Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator (1965)-- have received acclaim from eminent poets and critics, he did not receive public recognition until the last year and a half of his life and even now is little known to the average reader of poetry. This analysis attempts to answer several questions which occur to the student of Tolson's work by examining closely both his life and his work: Why is he a little-known literary figure although he is an excellent poet? Why did he produce only three books of poetry in a career that spanned over half a century? What is his place in Negro literature, American literature, and world literature?

As a colleague and friend of Professor Tolson, I was privileged to know him the last two and one-half years of his life. The desire to write about him and his poetry grew out of my warm regard for him as a person and the conviction that here was a great poet who had long been unjustly ignored by the literary world. When attention came to him with the publication of Harlem Gallery, he did not forget my interest

in writing about him before that time, and he encouraged me to begin an analysis of his work.

I am indebted to many persons for making this study possible: to Professor Tolson, who gave me the confidence to attempt what is the only book-length consideration of his life or work to date; to Mrs. Ruth Tolson, who initiated the study by making her husband's unpublished notes and papers available after his death in August, 1966, and who spent many hours giving me biographical data; to Ruth Marie Tolson, who filed her father's papers and made them readily accessible; to Mrs. Helen Tolson Wilson, who gave me biographical material; and to Dr. M. B. Tolson, Jr., who read each chapter of my manuscript, making additions, corrections, and helpful suggestions.

I am deeply grateful for the guidance and criticism of my committee chairman, Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr., who helped give shape and focus to my materials. By directing me to pertinent secondary materials, he assisted me in establishing a basis for the criticism and evaluation of Tolson's work. Helpful suggestions have also been offered by the members of my committee: Dr. Clinton Keeler, Dr. D. Judson Milburn, Dr. Bernard Belden, and Dr. Leon Munson.

In addition, I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. William H. Hale, President of Langston University, and other administrative personnel there who recommended me for a Title III grant, under

which I attended Oklahoma State University as a full-time student during 1966-67, and for a research grant during 1968-69; Dr.

Larzette G. Hale, Director of Development; Dr. William E. Sims, Dean of Academic Affairs; and Mrs. Elwyn E. Breaux, Chairman of the Department of English and Modern Languages.

My thanks go also to colleagues, friends, my parents, and other members of my family who have encouraged me during this study, especially my husband, Harold, who shares my feeling about Professor Tolson and his work, and who has given me his active support and help throughout this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. MELVIN TOLSON: POET, TEACHER, PHILOSOPHER.	1
II. <u>RENDEZVOUS WITH AMERICA</u>	45
III. <u>LIBRETTO FOR THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA</u>	87
IV. <u>HARLEM GALLERY: BOOK I, THE</u> <u>CURATOR</u>	130
V. TOLSON'S PLACE IN LITERATURE	190

CHAPTER I

MELVIN TOLSON: POET, TEACHER, PHILOSOPHER

The small gray-haired, brown-skinned professor slowly climbed the curved marble staircase of the White House. Shaking his head in disbelief, he paused a moment, looked back at the group of Negro friends and relatives at his heels, smiled, and sang softly to himself, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder."¹ Making his way up stairs was still not easy for him--only three months before he had undergone his second major abdominal operation for cancer in less than a year--but he savored this climb. At the age of sixty-five he had been invited to the White House to present a copy of his latest book of poetry to the President of the United States. It seemed impossible that a few weeks ago he had almost despaired that he would ever live to see his third book of poetry, Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator, in print or complete the final year of his forty-three years of college teaching, or have time at last to write during the daylight hours.

The entourage moved down the hall, and Tolson spied the name Hobart Taylor on a door. Again he had the feeling that he would wake up momentarily. He had known that Hobart Taylor, former classmate

of his oldest son, was a member of the White House staff, but even more vivid was the recollection of walking past the White House in his youth, when the only Negroes to be seen there wore white coats--and they were either coming in or going out. It was true that he knew no one else there except Zephyr, one of President Johnson's cooks who had been his student years before; but most of his ex-students--his favorite illustration was James Farmer--had long since bypassed the kitchen for the upper echelons of service,

As his party neared the anteroom where he was to autograph copies of the recently-published Harlem Gallery for the Presidential party and the proud group accompanying the poet, Tolson's mind flashed back to the beginning of his odyssey--to the chain of circumstances leading to his taking the road less travelled by, the road which had led to his being invited to the White House this morning of March 29, 1965.

Melvin Beaunorus Tolson's odyssey had begun February 6, 1900, in Moberly, Missouri. His father was the Reverend Alonzo Tolson, a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Of Irish, Indian, and Negro descent, Reverend Tolson had only an eighth-grade education, but he had taken numerous correspondence courses and had taught himself Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. Although he was an intellectual, he had little faith in college degrees. His oldest son, Melvin, did not become a minister in the tradition of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, however, but earned two college degrees

and was awarded two honorary doctorates; spent almost half a century as a college teacher; and produced four offspring who collected a total of twelve college degrees.

The itinerant preacher's family moved frequently from town to town in Missouri and Iowa. The minister was a good provider, who gardened, kept the cellar full, and was handy around the house. He enjoyed hunting, but one day when his four small children were standing in front of him, stairstep fashion, watching him clean his gun, it suddenly discharged and a bullet whizzed directly over their heads. He never hunted again. An aristocratic-looking man with a straight carriage, the quiet-spoken minister was an active member of the Republican party. After spending forty-five years in the ministry, he died in 1949 at the age of seventy.

Tolson's mother was a Cherokee Indian whose father had been killed when he refused to permit himself to become enslaved. An excellent seamstress, she helped to bolster the family income by sewing. Lera Tolson sang beautifully, and the Tolsons had their own family ensemble: Melvin played the mandolin, Yutha the violin, Helen the piano, and Rupert the drums. They all sang, and Helen took voice, piano, and dancing lessons, later attending a conservatory of music in Kansas City. Though Tolson could not be called a musician, he had a keen ear for music, and music permeates his poetry both consciously and unconsciously.

The Reverend Mr. Tolson and young Melvin would often go

fishing, the father discussing Plato and Aristotle while the mystified but interested youth listened. Of his parents' influence on his writing, he said, ". . . my mother was always making up verses in her head. She was highly intelligent and imaginative, but had little formal education. Like my father, I was a bookworm. Later, much later, I began scribbling verses on tablets and scraps of paper. I repeated, over and over, Shakespeare's immortal words in Sonnet 50: 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.' So, at twelve, I decided to join the immortal poets in a future Paradise."²

Lera Tolson was quite intuitive, a trait which the poet's wife feels that he inherited, especially when it came to judging character. His mother was always fearful of cancer and had frequent checkups. Her premonition was not groundless, for she died of cancer at the age of fifty in 1938, and three of her four children were victims of cancer during the next twenty-eight years. She and Melvin were particularly close, and when she died, she had the money he had sent her tucked under her pillow. The dedication of his first book reads: "To my Father, Alonzo, and The Memory of My Mother, Lera, whose life was a greater poem than any I may write."

Alonzo and Lera Tolson had a harmonious marriage. The children never heard their parents argue, and when the children misbehaved, the parents talked to them or deprived them of their privileges but seldom spanked them. Because they were the

minister's children, they were not encouraged to mingle much with other children. They enjoyed playing ball and sleigh-riding together. Once the two boys and Helen took a hard spill on the sleigh. Her nose was injured, but her brothers warned her that she could not play with them anymore if she told what had happened. Her parents never did learn the reason for the severe nosebleeds she suffered until long afterwards.³

Melvin was studious as a child. He planned to be a physician and often prepared weeds, which he made into medicine for his younger sisters and brother. Although small, he was a healthy, muscular, athletic boy. One day he was slugged by an Irish boy on an opposing ward school football team. He complained to his tackle, an Irish boy named Al. Al said, "The next time that S. O. B. comes around I'll get him." But Melvin got him first. Then a Negro boy on the other team knocked him down, and the free-for-all was on. They were a bunch of poor Irish, Negro, Swedish, and Jewish boys whose only barrier was social, Tolson recalled, not racial. He reflected that this was the interpretation of the social environment--social barriers, not racial--which stayed with him throughout his life.

Those boyhood days in Missouri were captured in part by the poet in one of the many notebooks he kept in which he reminisced about his colorful past:

. . . my little walnut-hued mother. . . was a descendant
from antebellum fugitives who hid themselves on the islands

in the Mark Twain country and in the glooms of the Ozarks, from which they raided at midnight the slave plantations along the Missouri and the Mississippi. Out of the melting-pot of this clan came gun-toting preachers and hallelujahing badmen whose legends grew whiskers in the dead yellow hills. One, a giant riverman, stole the sheriff's white horse and rode it out of town to join Jesse James at Independence; another, unfrocked, blew the lock off the church door, defied the Law, and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with his Forty-five on one side of the pulpit and his open Bible on the other.

Of Irish, French, Indian, and African bloods the members of the clan gathered on New Year's Eve, the Christians sipping eggnog, the sinners guzzling hard liquor. The young listened, wild-eyed and hush-mouthed, as elders spun Homeric tales, dipped snuff, smoked clay pipes, and belly-laughed at inferiors, white and black. I was puzzled by the fact that Justice and God were invariably on the side of the clan: for example, before the storyteller finished narrating how Brother Amos beat up a deacon on the trustee board or how Cousin Sue chased her fourth husband down the street with a butcher knife, he would glorify the virtues of the member of the clan. This always evoke "Uh, huhs" and "Amens."⁴

Tolson painted pictures, which he framed and peddled, by the time he was ten. He and a friend named Claude had their own tent show. Claude versified and invented mechanical toys, while Tolson painted the scenery and played Caesar. One day he was painting on an easel in his front yard when he sensed someone behind him. He turned and saw there a man who looked like the very artists he had seen in art books. The stranger, who was a passenger on a nearby train which had a hot box, exclaimed in "Frenchified English, with a grandiloquent flourish: 'Marvelous! Marvelous! You must go to Paris with me! Where is your father?'" At last his dream had come true and he raced home to blurt out the good news to his mother. She parted the curtains, glared at the "bizarre figure" outside, and locked every door in the house.⁵ Tolson never painted again, but turned instead to poetry. Years later, however, his musical and artistic talents were revealed in his emphasis on sound, sight, and sense in his poetry-- what he referred to as his "three S's of Parnassus."

It was about this time that Tolson became acquainted with Mrs. George Markwell, a white lady who made her library available to this youngster who read everything he had access to. It was in her home that he had his first experience with racial prejudice. Mrs. Markwell's daughter told him one day, "The only Negro of worth is Booker T. Washington, and the only reason he has excelled is that he is half white. He would have been greater had he been all white." Melvin went to her mother and asked if this were true. Mrs. Markwell

did not reply, but sent him to the bookshelf for a copy of Carlyle's French Revolution and told him to look through the illustrations until he found the answer for himself. As he scanned the pages, he came to a picture of a magnificent white stallion on which was mounted a jet-black man resplendent in uniform--Touissant L'Ouverture. It was a lesson he never forgot, and racial pride became one of the chief themes of his conversation, lectures, and poetry in the years ahead.

Tolson encountered prejudice few times in his childhood, however, as his family moved from Moberly to New Franklin to DeSota to Slater, Missouri, and then on to Iowa. His first published poem appeared in the "Poet's Corner" of an Oscaloosa newspaper in 1912. He claimed that he was first inspired to write poetry in a local cemetery where he was reading verses on the tombstones. On one was the inscription

I am dead as all can see;
Prepare ye all to follow me.

As he pondered this advice, two lines suddenly came to him:

To follow you I'm not content
Until I know which way you went.

When he expounded seriously on inspiration, he pointed out that writing poetry is only one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration. He said, "Today poets are intellectual. A poet works on a poem as a mathematician works on a problem in Einsteinian relativity."

From Oscaloosa the family moved to Mason City, Iowa. It was

here that he "learned all he knew" about public speaking. Those who have heard him speak are hard put to it to say whether he was a better speaker or poet. His eighth-grade teacher, who was white, trained him to be a perfectionist by having him say one poem over and over, snapping her fingers to indicate when a word should be accented. He recalled that he could not help feeling slightly superior as he stood there, reddish-brown hair parted in the middle and slicked down with lard, reciting the poems of the first Negro poet to gain national recognition, Paul Laurence Dunbar, to white audiences. He tried to imitate the dialect poems of Dunbar at this time and little dreamed that his poetry would someday be compared not to that of Dunbar and other Afro-American poets, but to that of Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.

Tolson attended a Kansas City, Missouri, high school, where he was captain of the football team, class poet, and both director and actor in the Greek Club's Little Theatre. He worked in a packing house for awhile and enrolled in Fisk University in 1919. Years later he learned that John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate were then at Vanderbilt University, and he knew what the racial barrier had cost him as a poet in terms of time.

In 1920 he enrolled in the oldest Negro educational institution in the United States, Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. Founded as Ashmun Institute by Abolitionists before the Civil War, it was originally named for Jehudi Ashmun, the white founder

of the Republic of Liberia. Tolson lived in Ashmun Hall as a student at Lincoln, not knowing that his life would be further entwined with Ashmun's in that he would be appointed poet laureate of Liberia some twenty-seven years later. At Lincoln University he won awards in speech, debate, dramatics, and classical literatures--and was captain of the football team. He further juxtaposed his activities by writing poetry and waiting tables along the famous Atlantic City boardwalk.

When "Cap," as he was called by his classmates, ran across a copy of Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" in the university library one day, his career as a poet came near to getting a real start. Unfortunately he took the poem to one of his professors, who advised him, "Leave that stuff alone, Mr. Tolson, and go back to the Romantics and Victorians!" Had he followed his intuition rather than his professor's advice, he would likely have developed the style of his maturity much earlier.

Tolson was a good student and was selected to teach a course of freshman English when he was a junior. In his senior year he attended a fraternity dance, where he noticed an attractive red-haired girl talking with some other girls. He pointed her out to a fraternity brother, who promptly bet him a dollar that she would not dance with him. Tolson put up his dollar, invited the young lady to dance, and she accepted. He learned that she was Miss Ruth Southall from Virginia who was visiting relatives in Pennsylvania and went back to collect his dollar. His friend paid off, then bet him another dollar that

the visitor would not dance with him a second time. After collecting his second dollar, Tolson continued to dance with Miss Southall and capped the evening off by escorting her home. She recalled years later that she was far less impressed with his dancing ability than with his personality and intellect.⁶ A few months later Ruth Southall agreed to marry Melvin Tolson. She assumed the difficult but rewarding role of devoting the next forty-four years to a man with boundless energy and ambition--a radical, courageous, talented man, who refused to act as a black man was supposed to act in the south Texas town of Marshall, where they established a home. During their twenty-four year stay in Marshall, she would bear four children: M. B., Jr., Arthur, Wiley, and Ruth Marie; and he would distinguish himself as a college teacher, speaker, debate coach, director of plays, and poet.

Fresh out of Lincoln University, Tolson was excited at the prospect of being a college teacher. He listened attentively to the speeches during the first faculty meeting at Wiley College and was pleased when at the end of the opening session a chemistry professor, who was also a fraternity brother of his, called him aside and said, "Tolson, I want to talk to you. You're just getting started. Come over tomorrow, and I'll give you the lowdown." Tolson went to his apartment the next evening but was hardly prepared for the sight that greeted him. In the center of the room was a huge table piled high with books. His friend had a forty-five on the table and was applying vaseline to some bullets. He carried a cane loaded with lead and also

a razor. This was far from Tolson's concept of a professor's accoutrements, but his colleague stated his case clearly: "There are bad Negroes here and 'badder' white folks." Experience would prove the truth of his friend's statement.

It was as a debate coach that the Tolson name first became known throughout the South and Southwest. His Wiley College teams had a ten-year winning streak at one time. His formula for success was simple: (1) his debaters learned the logical fallacies; (2) they debated their coach for one year before they could make the team. M. B., Jr., frequently fell asleep in the living room to the drone of the debaters' voices, for the practice sessions did not begin till around nine p. m. Often he would awaken, startled, at two or three a. m., the loud and heated voices making him fear that a fight was about to erupt.⁷

But those Wiley teams had everything, Tolson declared: reasoning, wit, satire, eloquence. His team was the first Negro team to be mentioned in the International Journal of Forensics. They participated in the first interracial debate, which took place in Avery Chapel, Oklahoma City, in 1929 between Wiley College and Oklahoma City University. His teams also staged the first interracial debates in the South, Southwest, and on the East Coast. In a non-decision about they debated the University of Kansas when its team included the champion extemporaneous speaker of the United States. During the 1934-35 season they traveled to the University of Southern California, where they debated the national champions. Before the debate Tolson

scouted the speech department, which was as large as all of Wiley College. His team wanted to visit the campus, too, but Tolson told them, "They're not so much. We'll visit them after we win the debate, just to show them we're good sports." ⁸ Then they proceeded to defeat the national champions before a crowd of 1,100 people. Mae West read about the amazing record of the little Texas team and asked to meet the coach. For years Tolson proudly displayed the autographed picture which she gave him.

Among his Wiley College debaters were Thomas Cole, the first Negro to receive a Ph. D. from the University of Texas (later he served as president of Wiley College); Frederick Douglass Weaver, grandson of the famous Frederick Douglass and member of the New York Public Housing Authority; and James Farmer, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. One of his outstanding debaters was a boy named Henry Heights, whose name appears in Harlem Gallery as Hideho Heights ("Hideho" was derived from Cab Calloway's "Hi-de-ho!"). On one trip through the South, Tolson, Heights, and the other debaters stopped at a cafe. When some white men came in looking around suspiciously and the debaters overheard the word "rape" and the question, "Did you catch them?" they lost their appetites in a hurry. This was one place where they did not care to have their championship style of argumentation put to a test. On another trip through Arkansas on their way to Tennessee the fog became extremely thick. Suddenly one of the boys in the back seat who

had been asleep sat up and yelled "Stop!" They got out of the car to discover that they had driven onto a levee. Only a few feet ahead was a dropoff into the Mississippi River. Such stories Mrs. Tolson did not hear until years later when the poet would be reminiscing with old friends.

Near the end of the thirties Tolson felt that interest in debate was waning and he began to put more emphasis on drama. In his work as director of dramatic productions at Wiley, he discovered several actors, directors, and other public figures in-the-making: Virgil Richardson, star of The Big White Fog (said by Broadway producer Abram Hill to have the best voice in America); Louise Pollard, featured in the Hollywood production of The Lost City; Lonnie Jackson, Broadway actor; Dorothea Towles, Dior model in Paris; and James Farmer.

He had been writing all along, though fulltime teaching, debate trips, and directing plays took most of his time. During these busy years and the ones following he jotted down hundreds of ideas and outlines for poems, novels, and plays which he planned to write when there was time. Some of the short plays which he completed were entitled "The House By the Side of the Tracks," "The ABC Cafe on Deep Eighteenth," "An Act of God," and "Upper Boulders in the Sun." One play, "Transfiguration Springs," revolves around a native Virginian on an Oklahoma ranch who refuses the offer of his Negro neighbor to share his water supply during a drouth. Rather than

accept a favor from a Negro, he steals his water. His attitude changes only when his Negro neighbor rescues his wife from a dangerous situation. "Bivouac on the Santa Fe" pictures a small detachment of soldiers during the days of early Oklahoma statehood and sets up a three-way racial feud among a white man, an Indian, and a Negro, the intensity of which is matched by a tornado, which forces the men to either help one another or be destroyed.

Some of his full-length plays include "The Moses of Beale Street" and "Southern Front." While teaching at Langston University, he also adapted and dramatized Schuyler's novel Black No More and Walter White's The Fire in the Flint. He staged the latter in 1952 at an NAACP meeting at Convention Hall in Oklahoma City for over five thousand people.

As early as 1924 he tried his hand at a novel, which he entitled "Beyond the Zaretto." The setting was on the Zaretto River in Africa. Another novel, written in 1935, was set in Ethiopia. It was entitled "The Lion and the Jackal." A third novel, "All Aboard," was written during the 1950's while he was working on Libretto for the Republic of Liberia and finishing his dramatization of Black No More. At this time he felt that he got the best results when writing both prose and poetry, "one stimulating the other, one recuperating me for the other." He described his current novel in this way:

"All Aboard" deals with that American institution and legend, the Pullman porter. It covers the period

between the two World Wars. It grows out of intimate personal experience and research. The data in the Schomburg Collection of the Harlem Library were placed at the disposal of the writer by Dr. Lawrence D. Reddick, the curator. It is the odyssey of Duke Hands and the story of the unionization of the Pullman porters. It introduces a new literary device in which interior dialog (stream of consciousness) becomes exterior. . . . The characters, white and colored, in their interrelations, should give the work social as well as artistic significance.⁹

During this time he was also experimenting with poetry of various types. His method was to imitate the masters, learning the rules for the various forms through using them. The content of his work arose from his own experiences for the most part, and his subject was the black man. He eventually completed his course work for the M. A. in English at Columbia University, passed the comprehensive examination, and wrote his thesis, which concerned the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. By the fall of 1931 he lacked only the bibliography. His work with his debate teams lasted from 1932 to 1939, however, and it was not until 1939 that he got around to completing the bibliography and taking his degree.

One morning during the thirties he and a Wylie mathematics teacher who was a novice short-story writer strolled to the corner

drugstore in Marshall and purchased a copy of Modern Quarterly. They read that the editor, V. F. Calverton, had edited an anthology of Negro literature. Tolson sent Calverton some of his poems and soon received a letter commending his vigor and inspiration and predicting that he might well become the next great poet. When they met and Calverton repeated his belief in Tolson's potential, Tolson said, "You flatter me." Calverton looked at him for a long moment, then said, "Why in hell should I flatter you?"¹⁰ This was the beginning of a close friendship. Tolson referred to Calverton throughout his life as "the best friend I ever had." Both young men had intellectual interests and when Tolson was in New York Calverton gave him a key to his home and took him "places no Negro had ever been." At a party one evening a young white professor deliberately tried to bait him, but Tolson turned each remark aside pleasantly. Finally the professor said, "Tolson, you just can't be insulted, can you?" The poet smiled. "No, my friend. You see, a less intelligent man than I can't insult me, and a more intelligent one won't."

Calverton introduced him to numerous artists and writers in Greenwich Village, and he listened to and participated in all-night discussions which caused him to question almost everything he had believed. The experience was invaluable to him as a writer, and it was difficult to return to the literary desert of south Texas. When he did return, he invited Calverton to come to Marshall and talk to his students. Tolson recalled that it took a wagon to carry away the

whiskey bottles afterwards, but the students enjoyed an "intellectual banquet" the likes of which they had never known before.

Calverton encouraged him to send the manuscript of a 340-page book of poetry he had just completed to Maxwell Perkins and Bennett Cerf. It was entitled "A Gallery of Harlem Portraits" and was patterned after Spoon River Anthology. Cerf turned it down not because of its artistic merit but because he thought it would not sell. A letter from Maxwell Perkins of Charles Scribner's Sons, written sometime after he had rejected the manuscript, expresses a similar regret:

I know that it is bitterly discouraging to try to find a publisher for anything much out of the ordinary, and for poetry of any kind perhaps. I wish we could have done the Portraits, but anybody who was in a publishing house and remembered the efforts that had been made in past years with poetical writings of talent and the large lack of success would understand also the publisher's difficulty.¹¹

Tolson's response to these rejections was to put his "man-wrecked" manuscript in a trunk and not write again for several years.

The incentive for renewing his efforts was an invitation from Marshall Davis, chairman of the judging board of the National Poetry Contest sponsored by the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940. The other judges were Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps.

Tolson decided to enter, and the result was "Dark Symphony," which won first place and was exhibited in the Hall of Literature in Chicago. Published in the Atlantic Monthly, the poem brought him national attention for the first time. A review of the poem in the Los Angeles Times stated: "It not only voices the ideals of our time, it is also alive with what makes poetry for most of us--and that is music."¹² "Dark Symphony" is one of the most popular of all Tolson's poems.¹³ It has been recited at numerous NAACP meetings and programs wherever people have gathered to discuss human rights.

Elated when "Dark Symphony" won the National Poetry Contest, Tolson sent his friend Calverton a copy of the poem. As he was crossing the campus several mornings later, a student approached with a telegram. The dazzling brightness of the sun made his head spin as he read the message from Calverton's wife: V. F. Calverton was dead at the age of forty of leukemia. Tolson thought of their last parting. He had said, "Till we meet again," and Calverton had replied strangely, "Where?" Now Tolson wondered if his friend had known this was the last goodbye. "The Man Inside," which appears in his first book of poetry, commemorates his feelings about the friend who drew him "into the catholic Evermore." The poem concludes, "We stood on common ground, in transfiguring light, / Where the man inside is neither Black nor White."¹⁴

It was Tolson's ability to judge men on an individual basis rather than by their color that saved him from the bitterness and hatred

which possesses some people. He was not a man to look the other way when he saw injustice, however, and he was dedicated to the cause of the masses. Many mornings he arrived home just as the children were leaving for school. Years later they learned of the dangerous all-night meetings, where he had helped organize poor sharecroppers, both black and white.¹⁵ He admitted that he did not know how he ever escaped being lynched. An ex-president of Wiley College once told him, "Many times I heard that you were speaking in those little towns and I thought I'd hear the next morning that a teacher was hanging on a tree." An article which appeared in the Chicago Defender after the publication of Tolson's first book comments that most Negro college students in the deep South either knew Tolson personally or had heard of him and "of his fearlessness before lynch mobs." As an aside, the reviewer mentioned that "one Texan who led a mob against him later gave a piano to his Little Theatre."¹⁶

Without doubt Tolson's speeches made some of his audiences uncomfortable, not to mention those responsible for issuing him the invitation. He was a dynamic orator, and his debaters told him, "Doc, if we had your gifts, we'd be the richest politicians around." Tolson lacked the tactfulness of many politicians, however; his interest was in telling the truth as he saw it. At a Gladewater High School commencement one spring, the principal asked him to sit down because he was talking too long. As Tolson noted the restlessness of the white superintendent, he knew what had determined the

principal's conception of the length of his address. At the end of another commencement address in a little Louisiana town which had been the site of a multiple lynching recently, only two or three uneasy people attended the reception given afterwards in honor of the guest speaker. Each time a car drove by, everyone would rush to the window. Finally, Tolson and the Wiley student who had driven him down, Benjamin Bell, decided to leave by the back road, much to the relief of their hosts. The next morning they heard that the mob had been waiting for them on the main highway. One time Tolson was ordered down to the police station by an outraged deputy--not for an inflammatory speech, but for passing a white driver with his car. While Tolson's small children sat trembling in the car, the deputy threatened to whip their father for his audacity. He did not reply to his charges, but addressed his remarks calmly to the sheriff, who eventually let him off with a warning.¹⁷

In spite of these harrowing experiences, Tolson kept his sense of humor, once telling a story of his own stereotyped conception of Eskimos. One evening at Wiley College he was to share the platform with a quartet and a visiting Negro soloist, Chief Tecumseh. He meandered over to the auditorium early to meet the visitors. Chief Tecumseh introduced his accompanist, who turned out to be the first Eskimo Tolson had ever met. Immediately there flashed into his mind the story of the missionary who had given soap to an Eskimo--who thanked him for it and ate it.

During the 1940's Mary Lou Chamberlain, a former assistant editor of the Atlantic Monthly who had been impressed with "Dark Symphony," became an editor of Dodd, Mead, and Company. She wrote Tolson, asking him to collect some of his poems for a book. He had on hand "Dark Symphony," another long poem entitled "Rendezvous With America," which had been published in the 1942 summer issue of Common Ground, two or three sonnets, and a few other poems. He was teaching fulltime, but during the summer months he completed enough poems for a book. The letter of acceptance of his manuscript arrived Christmas Eve, 1943.

Rendezvous With America was published in 1944 and was well received. Several thousand reprints of the title poem were made--one women's organization asked for 1,500. It appeared in magazines and newspapers and was used in a national bond drive on the Pacific Coast and in interracial study groups throughout the country. Later it was set to music. William Rose Benet called Rendezvous "remarkable" in an article in Saturday Review. He commended the "powerful rhythm and original language," saying the work was "exciting" and that Tolson had "the insurrection in him of the real poet."¹⁸ A review in the Pittsburgh Courier pointed out the difference in Tolson's work and that of his former idol, Paul L. Dunbar: "The two Negro poets, Dunbar and Tolson, are as unlike as Edgar Guest and Archibald MacLeish. Tolson is a significant intellect, a multi-cultured citizen of the world. He is Shostakovich in verse. He has

mastered a new way of saying things. His are glittering concentrates of passion and sense in new-fashioned verbal habiliments."¹⁹

The "new-fashioned verbal habiliments" were portents of things to come. After being detoured a number of times, Tolson was finding at last the right style for him. A few years before while browsing in a Harlem bookstore, he had overheard a white couple discussing a first edition of The Waste Land. Curious, he read it and was struck by the style, particularly the "inverted participial phrase, because I was grounded in grammar, and I knew Eliot was 'doing something.'" Tolson's fascination with grammar caused him to compose a pamphlet for his students entitled "Forty Uses of the Noun." His dictionary was his constant companion, for vocabulary-building he felt was a necessity both for him and his students. He was saturated with the classics of various literatures. It was not surprising that Eliot's style was appealing to him, though it would be some years before he would develop fully his own version of it. The trend his work was taking is indicated by a letter of rejection he received from the poetry editor of Mainstream in 1946. He criticized Tolson for making confusing references, cramming too much into the poem, telescoping language, and obscurity. Such criticism did little to curb these tendencies, however, for he was on his way with the difficult, allusive style which would flower in Libretto to the Republic of Liberia (1953).

Tolson's stature during his tenure at Wiley College was noted in

an editorial which appeared in the Wiley Reporter shortly after he had moved to Langston, Oklahoma, to assume his duties as professor of English and drama and director of the Dustbowl Players at Langston University. The article stated in part:

Tolson was more than an instructor at Wiley: he was a part of Wiley College. . . . There is no forgetting his "Voice in the Wilderness." Nor is there any forgetting his love for dramatics and his dream of a "Little Log Cabin Theatre" on Wiley's campus. . . . It would be a fitting tribute to finish this Little Log Cabin Theatre and dedicate it to him.

Monuments are only for the great, and after tracing thru [sic] the records of Wiley's history, we find few men of greater stature than the radical little man who brought undying fame to Wiley as a debate coach, lecturer, author, instructor, and personality. Thousands went thru Wiley during his time: they have not forgotten. Nor have the countless others who saw his plays and players, heard his debate teams, and read his works. Numerous cities will accept with open arms any group having sincere loyalty to him. This is a worthy cause. Let's build a monument to it.

20

The monument was never built, but Tolson's move to Langston

in 1947 initiated a new era in his writing career. It was in this year that he was named poet laureate of Liberia, the result of another "artistry of circumstance" reminiscent of Hardy. While he was still teaching in Marshall, Texas, one of his students dropped by with his girlfriend to chat with the Tolsons one evening. The young woman mentioned that she was related to someone in the Liberian embassy. Tolson never knew how he was selected to be the poet laureate of Liberia, for his former student's friend, with whom he had talked briefly one evening, was the only "connection" he had with Liberia. The appointment now turned his thoughts toward the major task of composing a poem of tribute to the African republic. The stylistic characteristics which were becoming manifest in Rendezvous were to mature in the decade which elapsed between the appearance of his first two books of poetry. The Libretto (1953) reveals the depth and scope of his cultural, historical, religious, philosophical, and literary resources. A review in Poetry magazine states that the Libretto "is not merely an occasional poem. In its breadth, in the subtlety and richness of its allusions, and in the force and suggestiveness of its language, it is a triumph of poetry on the grand scale."²¹

In the New York Times Book Review section, Selden Rodman wrote that the Libretto was "a work of poetic synthesis in the symbolic vein altogether worthy to be discussed in the company of such poems as 'The Wasteland' [sic], 'The Bridge,' and 'Paterson'. . . . His poem opens vistas undreamt of by the English-speaking poets of his race

and by few poets of other races.²²

Tolson had long since formed the habit of sleeping the first part of the night, waking around midnight, and working for several hours. This was the only way he could manage to write since his schedule called for teaching, directing the Dust Bowl Players, and attending teachers' meetings and committee meetings when he was forced into it. In addition he was a popular speaker for all kinds of programs throughout the South and Southwest. It was difficult to find time to write, but it was something he had to do. He said, "The urge to write is as powerful as the drives of sex and hunger. Here is a good piece of dialogue you have done. You know the thrill of Columbus when he saw that light shining across the unknown ocean. The old typewriter rattles again. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps!"²³

During this busy time he directed such plays as Dial 'M' for Murder, A Raisin in the Sun, The Heiress, Lost Horizon, and No Exit, as well as his own highly-publicized dramatization of The Fire in the Flint. His interest in writing poetry did not wane in the midst of these time-consuming activities, however, and in 1952 he was named recipient of the Bess Hokim Award by Poetry magazine for his long psychological poem "E. & O. E."

The following year Libretto was published, and on January 11, 1954, the Liberian government honored him by sponsoring a literary tea at the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D. C. Four months later Ambassador Simpson conferred upon him "a distinction . . .

which admits him to the Knighthood of the Order of the Star of Africa."²⁴ Ambassador Simpson later visited Langston University, and in 1956 Tolson was invited to attend President Tubman's inauguration in Liberia at the expense of the Liberian government.

An unpretentious person, he was impressed by the detailed instructions concerning proper dress and protocol for the inauguration. The various personalities he encountered there fascinated him and he was entertained by their reactions to him. The Soviet ambassador to Liberia seemed quite awed by the fact that he was a poet, whereas the Liberian chiefs paid little attention to his poet laureate title, but honored him as mayor of Langston. Even this failed to impress one old chief when he learned that Tolson had only one wife. The chief had eight wives, and he inquired subtly whether America had any kula nuts, a delicacy similar to snuff which reputedly bolstered the virility. Before returning home Tolson went to France on what proved to be his only trip abroad. Here he visited with his son M. B., Jr., who was working toward a diplôme in contemporary literature at the Sorbonne.

The Tolsons were in Langston about three years before moving into the white frame house just off Highway 33, where they lived until his retirement. In 1954 he was elected mayor of Langston. He served four consecutive terms, hoping he could do something for the all-Negro village, but there was little money to work with. Whenever someone wanted a street light placed in front of his house, he

consulted the mayor, and his family encouraged him to give up the position which took much of his time away from his writing.

His courses were popular with the students. It was an unwritten law that every student should take at least one course with Tolson. No matter what the name of the course, it included far more than the name implied, and the dictionary was always one of the textbooks. The notebook of a student in one of his English literature classes²⁵ contains the following statements on diverse subjects, a few of which fall within the realm of English literature:

The Round Table was a symbol of social equality.

Forms of definitions: authority, exemplification, explication, implication, legation, analogy.

"If you don't know where you came from, you don't know where you're going." (Lincoln)

"The lie of the artist is the only lie for which a mortal or a god should die." (Picasso)

Every person is a tridimensionality: biological, sociological, psychological.

3 Ages of Man: Exploration, Exploitation, Explanation.

His method of teaching made an indelible impression on the many students who passed through his classroom. An actor who performed

wherever there was an audience, he kept his students guessing as to what the hour would hold. He might jump up on his desk and lecture from there to make a point, order two students to dance to the meter of a poem, or spin a series of tales about famous persons he had known. Whatever the subject, it would end up as philosophy. He was a fanatic on vocabulary-building, often declaring that the only difference between a bank president and a janitor was their vocabulary. Some days he would seize on a student who could not define one of the erudite terms he delighted in throwing around and the show was on-- to the delight of the class and the student who was about to be showered with attention for the next few minutes:

Lordy, Lordy, Jones! I'm so glad you came to this university! I'm so glad you're in my class! What if you'd gone to some other college and revealed all that compounded ignorance! Girls, take a good look at this poor boy from the backwoods. Don't you marry him or the one just like him sitting next to you. You wait! It's far better to spend your honeymoon in the Waldorf Astoria than in Joe's Motel, and don't you forget it. Now, Jones, explain to the class how it's possible for a student to live eighteen years, spend twelve of them in an educational institution, and arrive at college so completely uninformed about the English language.

The tirade would be accompanied by a ferocious scowl, arm-waving, desk-pounding--the works. It was an honor to be singled out by Tolson as the horrible example of the day, however, for the student knew he was a favorite. No teacher cared more for his students than Tolson, whose papers contain many letters of appreciation and gratitude which testify to his effectiveness as a teacher and friend.

Another method he used to get his students headed in the direction of the library was to appeal to their racial pride. He demanded excellence, was quick to praise when they worked, and ready to lambast when they did not. One diatribe went like this:

You know, I believe some of you students have heard that if you study hard you'll go crazy. Don't you know that's a hangover from slavery? Your grandpa had the choice of being a preacher, a teacher, an undertaker, or a bum. From the looks of these papers, I'd say you're settling for the last choice, even though the professions are wide open to you today. You know where white folks put information they want to hide from you?

Books and magazines and newspapers--that's where!

Hopefully, there was a general exodus to the library. One of his speech students said of him, "I've decided to strive for excellence because Dr. Tolson made me see that mediocrity is not good enough."²⁶ After over forty years of orating to his students, Tolson was quite at ease with the various audiences of eminence he faced

during his last two years. Words came easily to him. He loved to talk, and he welcomed the challenge of winning new friends, even in the final months of his fatal illness.

With the publication of the Libretto Tolson believed himself written out. He had put the best of himself into the long ode. It was only a matter of months, however, before he began to think once more of the old manuscript of Harlem Portraits which he had scrapped long ago. He considered weaving the characters into a story first, and then he conceived the idea of a great epic work which would narrate the story of the Negro in America from the early 1600's to the present time. It would be a five-volume work entitled Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator; Book II, Egypt Land; Book III, The Red Sea; Book IV, The Wilderness; and Book V, The Promised Land. This ambitious undertaking, unique in American literature, was to be only partially realized, for the first volume was the only one completed before his death. Like several other lengthy works in American literature--Crane's The Bridge, Williams' Paterson, and perhaps Pound's Cantos--the influence the complete work would have had can only be a matter of conjecture.

Tolson had always been extraordinarily healthy. He was a dynamic person with seemingly boundless energy. In his later years when his children would come home for visits, he would keep them up all night talking until they would plead exhaustion and go to bed.²⁷

Because his family had a history of cancer, he observed the precaution

of having periodic checkups, but little suspected that the stomach pains he suffered during the spring of 1964 were indicative of anything other than the gallstones which his doctor said would have to be removed. He entered the hospital in nearby Guthrie, Oklahoma, in April for the operation. His family was hardly prepared for the news that he had an abdominal malignancy and had only about six months to live. They could not bring themselves to tell the energetic, ambitious Tolson, but he read the truth in their faces. His reaction was to announce that he had too much work to do to die in six months and that he would show them that the doctor was wrong. One of his students suggested a cancer specialist in Dallas, and Tolson made an appointment with the man who would prolong his life for two years, Dr. William Strickland.

He had been reading proof on Harlem Gallery in April before the operation. Time dragged now as he awaited its publication. In September he began his final year of teaching before retirement. His health declined steadily. Shortly before the Christmas holidays he made an appointment to enter St. Paul's Hospital in Dallas for a second operation which would follow the first by only eight months. He feared he would not live to see Harlem Gallery in print. His students who attended the English Club Christmas party did not fathom his state of mind, however, for he joined them on the dance floor, joking and entertaining as usual, reminiscing about his old friend W. C. Handy when the band played "The St. Louis Blues."

As he lay in a weakened condition attempting to recuperate from his operation in early January, Karl Shapiro's pre-publication review of Harlem Gallery appeared in the Book Week section of the New York Herald Tribune. No better medicine could have been prescribed than the telephone calls, letters, and telegrams of congratulations which came pouring in--for Shapiro had heralded Harlem Gallery as a work "improvised by one of the great architects of modern poetry" and had predicted that "this work, like other works of its quality in the past, will turn out to be not only an end in itself but the door to poetry that everyone has been looking for."²⁸ Miraculously, Tolson was back in the classroom by February. President William H. Hale arranged a first-floor classroom for him, but the irrepressible little professor could not stay there when most of his colleagues had offices on second. It was a familiar sight to see him slipping upstairs in his red house-shoes--the one concession he made to his convalescent state.

Tolson rather enjoyed his role as campus character. When someone would comment about his "unique" methods of teaching and course content, he would reply that he was merely trying to teach his students "how to ape instead of monkey." When, late as usual, he dashed up to join the moving line of faculty members in academic regalia as they marched into the auditorium for the spring commencement exercises the May of his retirement, his tassel half on one side of his cap and half on the other, one of his colleagues shook his head and smiled, "Look at that Tolson. Sometimes I think that man must

have gotten his degree from the University of Mars." And he kept his own myth going by telling stories on himself. One of his favorites was a true story concerning a neighbor in Langston who, when asked what Prof Tolson was doing these days, replied, "Oh, he's still typin'."

But to the surprise of his neighbors--and of Tolson--when Harlem Gallery went on sale in March, 1965, he was invited to New York, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C., where he began to receive long overdue tributes from the literary world. Langston University honored him by dedicating the spring Fine Arts Festival to him and by inviting his friend and critic Karl Shapiro to share the podium with him. Langston University audiences and guests from nearby towns and universities enjoyed two delightful evenings of poetry recited by the poets. At the university retirement banquet on May 17, Tolson again had a captive audience. The guests gasped with laughter as he described the shocked expression on a fellow teacher's face a few days previously when he had approached Tolson in the hall, taken him aside, and whispered, "Tolson, have you been lecturing to your students with your pants unzipped!" The poet had looked him straight in the eye and replied, "Colleague, I teach my students to look up. And if you as a professor at Langston University would do the same, you would never have seen my unzipped pants!" Adroitly changing the mood, he told the group that had death not taken his friend Robert Frost, he would have been sharing this evening with them, for he had promised Tolson at Breadloaf that he would come to Langston

on the occasion of his retirement. He said, "Now I, like Frost, have miles to go before I sleep." For my fellow teachers who are retiring and me, the important thing is not that we are old, but how we look, the stance we take." He concluded with a quotation from Tennyson's "Ulysses"

I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
 Life to the lees. . . . you and I are old;
 Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.
 Death closes all; but something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done.

Like Ulysses, Tolson could not retire. He accepted an invitation to become the first poet-in-residence at Tuskegee Institute for 1965-66. In October he spoke under the auspices of the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund at the Library of Congress, one of the first Negro poets to be so honored. A reception was given for him by the Liberian ambassador at the Liberian Embassy in November. He had more speaking engagements than he could fill, and he was trying to complete his research on the history of the Afro-American so that he could get Book II of his five-volume epic underway. What he did not anticipate was that he would have to fly to Dallas the morning after his appearance at the Library of Congress in October to undergo a third operation. Again, almost miraculously, he returned to the classroom in Tuskegee, although his family and friends feared for him in his weakened condition. When he spoke, it was with

the same vigor which had always marked his talks, however, and those who heard his address at the Oklahoma State University Arts and Sciences Banquet in Stillwater in February, 1966, scarcely thought that the dynamic philosopher-poet who talked about "The Ladder of the Mind" had only six months to live.

In April he was one of the speakers at the Fisk University Centennial Writers' Conference on "The Image of the Negro in American Literature." The enthusiasm which he generated is described by David Llorens: "One attends a writers' conference anticipating new ideas, pertinent criticisms, enhanced perspectives-- a touch of the inexplicable as well as the profound--but one also secretly hopes for that person who will rise to the occasion and provide the emotional stimulus that transforms writers' conferences into good old "down home" Baptist conventions--for at least a little while! That stimulus was provided by Melvin B. Tolson, the man described by Karl Shapiro as 'The Poet Who Writes in Negro'" His article, which appeared in Negro Digest, then went ahead to describe how Tolson, following Robert Hayden, a well-known black poet who insists that he is "a poet who happens to be a Negro,"

rose from his chair with the energy of one of his pupils, and in a sweeping gesture and a booming voice that rocked Jubilee Hall, he roared: "Nobody writes in a vacuum or out of a vacuum--when a man writes, he tells me which way he went in society."

The audience, now spellbound, listened as the man who might affectionately be called the grandfather of the conference spoke of the tridimensionality of Man: "A man has his biology, his sociology, and his psychology--and then he becomes a poet."

Glancing over his shoulder at Hayden, the grin on his face reminiscent of a mischievous lad, once again Tolson's tone was soft, almost reverent, "Hap, hap . . . let me see, hap means accident. Is someone going to make M. B. Tolson an accident? You'll never make me an accident" and by this time his voice was blazing to the rafters as he exclaimed:

"I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident--and I don't give a tinker's damn what you think." ²⁹

One of his finest moments occurred in New York City the evening of May 25 when George Kennan, president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, presented him with the annual poetry award. He recognized Tolson's tremendous breadth and scope with these words: "His poetry of Negro life and America, conceived on an epic scale, is at once bitter and laughing, colloquial and erudite, jazzy and philosophical."

But now his time was running out. He and Ruth returned to

their modest home in Langston, for there was one more date he was determined to keep before returning to Dallas for the checkup he had postponed as long as possible. All the Tolsons attended the commencement exercises at the University of Oklahoma in early June to see a family dream come true: Arthur became the third Tolson son to attain the Ph. D. How proud the poet was of his sons as well as of his wife and daughter, both of whom had master's degrees. He delighted in confiding to audiences, "I keep telling my boys, 'It doesn't matter how many doctor's degrees you boys get--you won't ever catch up with your old man. He has a head start on you--and as long as he's around he intends to keep it.'"

A few days later Tolson checked in at St. Paul's Hospital for the last time. There he remained for two months, while Dr. Strickland performed three more operations in a desperate attempt to prolong his life. He was stoic, even optimistic, through the torturous weeks as he spoke of the work he had to do. To a colleague at Langston who phoned him often, he spoke only once of his impending death. He expressed a wish that someone--or perhaps the State of Oklahoma--would put a marker by his home in Langston, indicating that an Oklahoma poet had lived there.

On August 29, 1966, at the age of sixty-six, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson died in Dallas, Texas. His funeral services were held in the I. W. Young Auditorium at Langston University, where so many audiences had come to hear him speak during his eighteen-year tenure

there. The college chaplain and the poet's colleagues and friends paid tribute to him in a simple religious service. He was buried in the Summit View Cemetery, Guthrie, Oklahoma on September 3, 1966. In the Page Library Annex at Langston University there is now a Melvin B. Tolson Room, which is a repository for a collection of Negro literature and art, but so far, the only marker in the area which bears his name is the redstone tombstone on the northeast side of the cemetery in Guthrie. It looks to the east, where fifteen miles away are his former home and the university where he taught while he wrote two of the three books which have established a place for him among twentieth-century American poets.

Tolson had intended to write an autobiography--and a fascinating story it was that he had to tell. An "unforgettable character" himself, he had toured the country with W. C. Handy, given addresses with Langston Hughes everywhere from college auditoriums to county jails; drunk tea with W. H. Auden, conversing loudly over the rumble of a protesting stomach because the guest had little supposed that Auden's invitation to tea meant tea and no more; and weathered a hurricane in the company of Robert Frost, who died before he could keep the promise he had made that evening to come to Oklahoma to visit the Tolsons.

But when his family and friends tried to persuade him to jot down the important events of his life or tape some of his experiences just in case the autobiography did not materialize--and it became

increasingly evident the last two years of his life that it would not--he refused to cooperate. His son Arthur purchased a tape recorder and tried to preserve some of the anecdotes which emerged in family conversations, but the sight of the tape recorder would signal the end of the session. As M. B., Jr., observed, "It was as if he felt that a biography or autobiography is the last thing one does--and he intended to postpone that final work as long as possible." To one of his would-be biographers who occasionally pressed him for information, he protested that he did not have the biographical information organized, that he wanted everything in order before beginning the work.

Now this was a discouraging statement indeed, because Tolson was a highly disorganized person. As he went about the campus, he would leave his briefcase in the classroom; a half-finished cigar (about which he would inquire later) in his chairman's office, where he had just spent forty-five minutes explaining why he had failed to fill out quadruplicate copies of a leave-of-absence form before going to Florida to judge a speech tournament six weeks previously; and his horn-rimmed spectacles (\$1.00 dime-store variety) over which he peered as he read or straightened out an errant student, on some colleague's desk. The countless pages of metaphors and allusions he had collected for years were spread all over the Zulu Club, the basement room in his home where he wrote and entertained the numerous friends who invaded frequently. But one could not out-argue the master-debater. His final rebuttal was always, "Now you know it's

not the poet's life that's important. It's the work. It's my work you should be studying and writing about. You'll find the man in the work anyway. A man's a jack-in-the-box. His actions aren't consistent, and you can't explain what he's done or predict what he'll do. But analyze his writing carefully and you'll have him. There's where you'll find the distilled essence of the man. "

And perhaps he was right--as far as his own work is concerned at least. In the work the reader discovers the poet's likes and dislikes, his attitude toward people and life in general. He sees that though his style of writing changed dramatically through the years, his basic values remained the same. To be sure, if one approaches the work with a knowledge of some of the psychological and sociological pressures which helped to shape these values, he will find himself better equipped to answer those questions which will occur to him: Why did Tolson write only three books of poetry? How does his pattern of development differ from that of such major contemporary literary figures as Frost, Yeats, and Eliot? What delayed for so many years the development of a style which was satisfactory to him? How is he regarded today by both black and white critics? What is his place in American literature and world literature? To find the answers to these and other questions, which may arise, one must examine the work carefully, for there he will find, as Tolson said, "the distilled essence of the man. "

NOTES

¹ All quotations and descriptions of Tolson's reactions to various incidents are the result of notes taken during conversations with him or during lectures he has given, unless otherwise indicated.

² "A Poet's Odyssey," Anger, and Beyond, ed. Herbert Hill (New York, 1966), pp. 193-194.

³ Conversation with Mrs. Helen Tolson Wilson, August, 1967.

⁴ Notebook is with Tolson papers, Washington, D. C.

⁵ "A Poet's Odyssey," p. 193.

⁶ Taped conversation with Professor and Mrs. M. B. Tolson, August, 1965.

⁷ Conversation with M. B. Tolson, Jr., October, 1966.

⁸ Dudley Randall, "Portrait of a Poet As Raconteur," Negro Digest, XV, No. 3 (January 1966) p. 57.

⁹ Tolson's unpublished notes.

¹⁰ Randall, p. 56.

¹¹Letter is dated November 28, 1939.

¹²Review is among Tolson's notes (n. d.).

¹³A recent anthology of Negro literature was named for the poem: Dark Symphony, eds. James A. Emmanuel and Theodore L. Cross (New York, 1968).

¹⁴Rendezvous With America (New York, 1944), p. 25.

¹⁵Conversation with M. B. Tolson, Jr., October, 1966.

¹⁶Ramona Lowe, "Poem 'Rendezvous With America' Wins Fame for Melvin Tolson," Chicago Defender, New York Bureau, February 24, 1945.

¹⁷Conversation with M. B. Tolson, Jr., October, 1966.

¹⁸"Two Powerful Negro Poets," March 24, 1945, p. 35.

¹⁹P. L. Prattis, 1944. Quotation is among Tolson's notes.

²⁰A copy of this article is with the Tolson papers, Washington, D. C.

²¹Lorenzo D. Turner, LXXXVI (June 1955), 174-176.

²²January 24, 1954.

²³"Caviar and Cabbages," Washington Tribune, February 9, 1939.

²⁴May 6, 1954.

²⁵Margaret Williams, English major who was enrolled in Tolson's English literature class in 1964-65.

²⁶Printed in *Obsequies of Melvin B. Tolson*, September 3, 1966.

²⁷Conversation with M. B. Tolson, Jr., January, 1967.

²⁸This review also appears as the Introduction to Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator.

²⁹"Seeking a New Image: Writers Converge at Fisk University," XV, No. 8 (June 1966), 60, 62-63.

CHAPTER II

RENDEZVOUS WITH AMERICA

When Tolson's "Dark Symphony" won first place in the National Poetry Contest sponsored by the American Negro Exposition in 1940, it gave him his first opportunity to make a mark in the literary world. "Dark Symphony" appeared in the September, 1941, issue of Atlantic Monthly. The poem impressed Mary Lou Chamberlain, assistant editor of the Atlantic Monthly, and when she accepted a position as editor with Dodd, Mead and Company sometime later, she wrote Tolson and asked him to collect some of his poems for a book. Besides "Dark Symphony" he had on hand another long poem, "Rendezvous With America,"¹ and several shorter poems. He spent the summer months of 1943 composing additional poems, and by December he had an acceptable manuscript.

Rendezvous With America, named for one of the major poems in the volume, was published in 1944. Several excellent poems appear in the collection, some of which were written much earlier. The book offers insight into his development as a poet. Now forty-four, he had been writing poetry for some thirty years. He had begun by imitating Paul Laurence Dunbar and other poets whom he admired. A

Shakespearian sonnet, a Whitmanesque compilation of descriptive detail in free verse, a series of words with onomatopoeic effects like Poe's,² lines vibrating with the rhythms of Vachel Lindsay--these seemed to be worthy exercises for an aspiring young poet. In the early 1930's he wrote a 340-page book of poems, "A Gallery of Harlem Portraits," patterned after Masters' Spoon River Anthology. For years he had saturated himself with great literature. His ambition, far-fetched though it might have seemed at the time, was to write poetry worthy of inclusion in anthologies with the work of the great poets whom he emulated. Coupled with this ambition was the desire to help the cause of the downtrodden peoples of the world. He was proud of his heritage as a Negro. He wanted to acquaint his readers with the accomplishments of the black man, as well as his history of endurance and long-suffering, that they might better understand and appreciate his capacity for making significant contributions to America and the world.

Versifying came easily to Tolson. He could have joined the line of folk bards whose poems were largely conventional. But to come up to the standard he set for himself early in life required half a century of intensive study and work. Whenever he was discouraged, he would tell himself, "In the kingdom of poetry, there are many mansions. The Negro, in his illiteracy, has produced some of our greatest lyrics as he told of tragedy in his history. But there are fewer real poets in the Negro race than in any other, and for this reason, the

most precious thing in the Negro race is a poet.³

When Rendezvous appeared, several critics called attention to his mastery of traditional form. Margaret Walker wrote, "He handles difficult metres with comparative ease,"⁴ and Nathaniel Tillman was equally complimentary: ". . . Professor Tolson seems to show a finer mastery of traditional poetic form than most of the recent Negro poets. He handles the quatrain, long or short line, with virtuosity. And he exhibits excellent technique in the twelve Shakespearian sonnets which comprise a section of the volume. Particularly effective are his cryptic final couplets."⁵

As Tillman's statements make clear, Rendezvous contains a number of different types of poems with diversity of form. Some of them seem to have been exercises in poetic technique which Tolson regarded as a challenge. One is "A Song for Myself." Tolson was quite proud that Robert Hillyer had called it a "tour de force" in a New York Times review which heralded him as "a good poet and a good craftsman as well."⁶ It consists of twenty-two eight-line stanzas with an ABCBDEFE rhyme pattern, in which the poet sets forth some fundamental truths, as he sees them, concerning mankind in general and himself in particular. The opening lines illustrate how content and form blend to capture the reader's interest:

I judge

My soul

Eagle

Nor mole:

A man

Is what

He saves

From rot.

The corn

Will fat

A hog

Or rat:

Are these

Dry bones

A hut's

Or throne's?

(p. 45)

These two sentences exhibit characteristics found throughout his work: juxtaposition of Biblical and literary phrases and commonplace items or ideas to produce effective images and metaphors, and the using of the commonplace to suggest the universal.

Much of Tolson's poetry presents the injustices suffered by the lower social classes, particularly the black man. Some of the poems in Rendezvous tend toward mere rhetoric, though in most of them his artistic technique prevents them from being propagandistic. The subject of race works its way into "A Song for Myself" in this stanza:

If hue
 Of skin
 Trademark
 A sin,
 Blame not
 The make
 For God's
 Mistake.

(p. 47)

Another poem which illustrates his ability to handle unusual stanzaic form is "The Furlough," an adaptation of the French ballade. The subject is unfaithfulness. A soldier on furlough, supposedly "an escalator to delight," resolves his jealous rage by choking his sweetheart to death:

Her beauty gathers rot on the golden bed,
 The worst can happen only in the brain.

(p. 24)

The stanzaic form can be observed in the opening quatrains:

The worst can happen only in the brain:
 I gaze upon her silken loveliness,
 She is a passion-flower of joy and pain
 On the golden bed I came back to possess.

I gaze upon her silken loveliness,

I image the intimacies of eager lovers
 On the golden bed I came back to possess,
 The eye of jealousy midnight uncovers.

(p. 23)

Even a preliminary reading leaves the reader with a number of memorable images, though he may regard such phrases as "silken loveliness" and "golden bed" conventional. If he reads aloud, he is struck by the musical quality and rhythm of the words and phrases. The content is hardly suited to the stylized form, revealing the poem to be an exercise in prosody.

The poems in Rendezvous reflect the fact that the boy Tolson was interested in both art and music and just a few months before his death, the poet confessed to an audience: "I'm frustrated twice. I'm a frustrated musician and a frustrated artist. But I went back to music and art in my poems."⁷

He incorporated both art and music in the formula for writing poetry which he developed in the 1930's. He called this formula his "three S's of Parnassus"--sight, sound, and sense. Sight referred to the appearance of the poem on the page; sound, to the sound of the words in his mind (an element which he tested by pacing the floor and reciting the lines loudly, regardless of the hour); sense, to the image, the appeal to the senses. He also relied on his knowledge of grammar and sentence construction in determining the varied line length as his poetry began to move away from conventional form.

Although the poems in Rendezvous are rooted in traditional style, Tolson often departs from the restrictions which such form imposes, and with the tools of sight, sound, and sense, he effects a unique style. He leans heavily on his "three S's of Parnassus" to bring forth originality out of metrical diversity.

The poems in Rendezvous are diverse both in subject matter and form. For this reason they are difficult to categorize. The 121-page book is divided into eight sections. Each of the four longer poems--"Rendezvous With America," "Dark Symphony," "The Idols of the Tribe," and "Tapestries of Time"--forms a unit. Most of the shorter poems are categorized by content, though one section consists of twelve sonnets which range in subject from the poet's grade-school teacher, who, with "the miracle of his integrity/ Put bone and blood and soul into girl and boy" ("The Gallows," p. 60) to a Malayan guide on a jungle path, who comments as he watches a python's coils pile up "high and dense" around the white man whose curse had obscured his warning: "Sahib, the blindness of scorn provokes offense" ("The Blindness of Scorn," p. 61). Other poems appear in sections entitled "Woodcuts for Americana," "A Song for Myself," and "Of Men and Cities."

One of the best-known poems in the book is the title poem. The title "Rendezvous With America" indicates the poet's acknowledgment of his bond with his country, a bond which he makes explicit in the poem. The setting is the years of the second World War, but the poem

spans American history from the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In ten sections, the verse forms move the poem from one event to another; they change tone and pace as the poet characterizes his America.

He combines traditional form with his sight, sound, and sense principle throughout the poem. Section I consists of eighteen lines of free verse divided into seven and eleven-line parts by an italicized quatrain which exhibits meter and rhyme. The poem begins,

Time unhinged the gates
 Of Plymouth Rock and Jamestown and Ellis Island,
 And worlds of men with hungers of body and soul
 Hazarded the wilderness of waters,
 Cadenced their destinies
 With the potters'-wheeling miracles
 Of mountain and valley, prairie and river.

These were the men

Who bridged the ocean

With arches of dreams

And piers of devotion:

Messiahs from the Sodoms and Gomorrahs of the Old World,
 Searchers for Cathay and Cipango and El Dorado

(p. 3)

This excerpt reveals not only the poet's interest in the appearance of the lines on the page, but also in imagery: "Time unhinged

the gates of Plymouth Rock . . ."; the immigrants spanned the ocean with "arches of dreams" and "piers of devotion." He juxtaposes the Biblical and historical past with the recent past--the immigrants are "Messiahs from Sodom and Gomorrah," etc. The sound is significant in unifying the lines and emphasizing their rhythmical effect. "Sodom . . . Searchers" are alliterative, and "Cathay and Cipango" are alliterative visually. Both the eye and ear respond to the eleven parallel phrases in the last part describing the Pilgrim Fathers. The transition from free verse to meter and back to free verse also enhances the effectiveness of the sound as well as the sight.

Part II is composed of five four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter with the AABB rhyme scheme. The sound is emphasized by rhythm, rhyme, and repetition of the opening phrase in the first line of each stanza, making for stronger unity: "These were the men" Stanza one reads,

These were the men of many breeds
 Who mixed their bloods and sowed their seeds.
 Designed in gold and shaped of dross,
 They raised the Sword beside the Cross.

(pp. 3-4)

The several poetic devices at work here, along with the decided metrical pattern, evoke emotion. In these four lines are found the alliterative words "men . . . many . . . mixed"; "breeds . . . bloods"; "sowed their seeds . . . shaped . . . Sword";

"Designed . . . dross." Assonance is revealed in the various o sounds: "dross" and "Cross"; "gold" and "Sword." The lines are rich in images and symbols, such as the "Sword" and "Cross." The stress pattern, which exhibits little variation, contrasts well with the free verse section which follows.

Part III appeals to the sight. The first two free-verse sections describe the immigration of various people to America. The first line is longer than the following ones, which are indented:

Into the arteries of the Republic poured

The babels of bloods,

The omegas of peoples,

The moods of continents,

The melting-pots of seas,

The flotsams of isms,

The flavors of tongues,

The yesterdays of martyrs,

The tomorrows of utopias.

(pp. 4-5)

Here is a balance not only in the appearance of the lines, but also in the parallel construction of the eight subjects and prepositional phrases which follow them. The poet's lifelong fascination with words reveals itself in the numerous synonyms he lists throughout his poetry. Alliteration appears in several phrases and assonance is apparent in the numerous a, o, and e sounds. The third S of Tolson's

trilogy, sense, is equally important, for the section contains many images. In the concluding part the poet rejoices in being a part of this great land. The rhythmical lines contain definitive metaphors rich with imagery which suggests the harmonious interrelationship of the peoples who call themselves Americans.

America?

America is the Black Man's country,
The Red Man's, the Yellow Man's,
The Brown Man's, the White Man's.

America?

An international river with a legion of tributaries!
A magnificent cosmorama with myriad patterns and colors!
A giant forest with loin-roots in a hundred lands!
A cosmopolitan orchestra with a thousand instruments playing

America!

(p. 5)

After reading this poem, a Southern newspaper man wrote, "Only a Negro whose spirit rises above so-called racial problems of today could write a poem so unprejudiced and so full of thankfulness to be an American, regardless of color, creed, or kind."⁸

Part IV changes from free verse to a predominantly iambic pentameter meter with an ABCB rhyme scheme. The language is figurative as the poet characterizes ten famous Americans in the five

quatrains. In this poem, which sings of the unity of Americans, the poet celebrates white folk heroes, both traditional and contemporary, as well as black heroes. The section begins,

I see America in Daniel Boone,
As he scouts in the Judas night of a forest aisle;
In big Paul Bunyan, as he guillotines
The timber avalanche that writhes a mile.

(p. 5)

Perhaps sense is the most noticeable of the three S's here as the characters come alive, their heroic qualities raising them above the average-man level. Treacherous dangers of blazing a trail in the wilderness face Daniel Boone in the "Judas night of a forest aisle," an image undergirded by the Biblical allusion. Such connotative words as "guillotine," "avalanche," and "writhes" evoke visions of the forests hewn down by Paul Bunyan's axe. Other memorable images in Part IV picture Johnny Appleseed, whose "miracles/ Fruit the hills and valleys and plains of our Promised Land"; Joe DiMaggio, whose bat "cuts a vacuum in the paralyzed air"; and "brown Joe Louis, surfed in white acclaim."

Part V has five sections, each defending a people who have suffered scorn in America: the "kikes," the "dagos," the "chinks," the "bohunks," the "niggers." Unity results from the parallel structure of the free-verse quatrains, each of which is preceded by short three-line introductions. One section is,

A blind man said,

"Look at the bohunks."

And I saw

Sikorsky blue-printing the cabala of the airways,
 Stokowski imprisoning the magic of symphonies with a baton,
 Zvak erecting St. Patrick's Cathedral in a forest of skyscrapers,
 Dvořák enwombing the multiple soul of the New World.

(p. 7)

Here again is intensity in condensation. Only a "blind man" would see "the bohunks" rather than his fellowmen, not to mention the great individuals who have made important contributions to all mankind. Tolson manipulates words as he creates such parallel verbals as "enwombing" or changes a word's ordinary grammatical function. In so doing he produces unique expressions, but he risks the danger of using phrases which appear to be contrived rather than inevitable. As William Rose Benet noted, "Sometimes Mr. Tolson uses words more for the love of their sound than for their aptitude. But he surprises with insight."⁹ Tolson was steeped in traditional, prescriptive grammar, which may have caused him to use English as if it were an inflected language and led him to the kind of syntax he sometimes resorts to, such as consciously changing the function of a word.

This passage has an abundance of allusions, ranging from "Brandeis opening the eyes of the blind to the constitution" to "Toscanini enchanting earthward the music of the spheres" (pp. 6, 7),

perhaps a forced figure.

Part VI changes once more from free verse to iambic pentameter with AABA rhyme scheme. In the five four-line stanzas the first two lines of each picture the many faces of America, revealing her weaknesses and strengths. Stanza three states:

America can worship gods of brass
 And bow before the strut of Breed and Class;
 Then gather to her bosom refugees
 Who champion the causes of the Mass.

(p. 8)

Here the poet speaks through symbols such as "gods of brass"; he personifies "Breed" and "Class," entities which he deplored, and shows how Americans can be asinine one moment and warm-hearted and generous the next. He emphasizes the b sound in "brass," "bow before," "Breed," and "bosom." The opening lines of the quatrain have the chanting rhythm, though perhaps not the forcefulness, of some of Vachel Lindsay's strongly rhythmical lines which are heavily alliterative, as in "The Congo."

In Part VII, the three S's are active. In twenty lines of five-stress and four-stress lines abounding with imagery, the poet pictures what happens when America sleeps:

Sometimes

Uncle Sam

Pillows his head on the Statue of Liberty,
 Tranquilizes himself on the soft couch of the Corn Belt,
 Laves his feet in the Golden Gate,
 And sinks into the nepenthe of slumber.

And the termites of anti-Semitism busy themselves
 And the Ku Klux Klan marches with rope and faggot
 And the money-changers plunder the Temple of Democracy
 And the copperheads start boring from within. . . .

(p. 9)

In this passage Tolson breathes life into the Uncle Sam cliché as he develops the personification. The sleeping giant, content with his accomplishments, stretches over the land: The inert figure contrasts sharply with the active agents of vice. Figurative language and imagery abound in the passage.

This section should be read aloud for fullest effect--as should all Tolson's poetry, for that matter. The verbs "pillows," "tranquilizes," and "laves" are connotative in their suggestion of the luxury of idleness. This is also true of the noun nepenthe. Alliteration appears in "Uncle Sam . . . statue . . . soft" and "sinks into . . . slumber." The whole stanza is based on the figure of Uncle Sam, the personification of America.

Part VIII is composed of three fifteen-line and one twenty-two line metrical sections. Parallel structure marks the three. Each begins with the line "I have a rendezvous with America" and each contains eight or nine end rhymes at various points. The three actions are broken by the one-word italicized lines "Here, / Now." The form of the last part is unusual.

I have a rendezvous with America

This Seventh of December.

The maiden freshness of Pearl Harbor's dawn,

The peace of seas that thieve the breath,

I shall remember.

Then

Out of yonder Sunrise Land of Death

The fascist spawn

Strikes like the talons of the mad harpoon,

Strikes like the moccasin in the black lagoon,

Strikes like the fury of the raw typhoon.

The traitor's ruse

And the traitor's lie,

Pearl Harbor's ruins

Of sea and sky,

Shall live with me

Till the day I die.

Here,

Now,

At Pearl Harbor, I remember

I have a rendezvous at Plymouth Rock and Valley Forge

This Seventh of December.

(pp. 10-11)

Not only is there parallel structure among the parts, but the same balance exists within the stanza. Lines three and four have similar construction, as do lines nine, ten, and eleven. The six lines of iambic dimeter (ll. 12-17) and the sharp accents of "Here, / Now," in lines eighteen and nineteen also reveal the poet's sense of form and balance. Interrupting longer lines, the monosyllabic one-word lines have almost the same metrical value as the lines preceding and following them. The combination of metrical lines, unpatterned, with lines of patterned meter illustrates again how the poet has mastered and molded traditional form rather than limiting himself to its demands. Here also the S-Trinity is at work.

Sound is important in this passage. Though the meter and length of line vary greatly, the lines have an irregular rhyme pattern: XABCAXCBDDDXEXEXEXXAXA. Equally significant is the rhythm. The sudden transition from the unpatterned line of four or five stresses to the one-word line "Then" brakes the rhythm. The pace picks up in the following trochaic line (Coleridge's "tripping" meter), slows in the next (iambic dimeter), and gathers momentum with the three successive lines which exhibit both end rhyme and parallel structure.

Here the poet uses a variety of feet and additional unstressed syllables to move the line rapidly, achieving emphasis with the triplet:

/ / / / / / / /
 Strikes like the talons of the mad harpoon
 / / / / / / / /
 Strikes like the mocassin in the black lagoon,
 / / / / / / / /
 Strikes like the fury of the raw typhoon.

The repetition of the first word, an action verb, and the unusual combination of initial trochee, anapests, and iambs is followed by the short lines of iambs and anapests. Then comes the pause-- "Here, / Now," and a resumption of the metrical form which initiated the stanza.

The s and r sounds appear repeatedly. The hissing s sound reinforces the serpent image summoned up by "spawn . . . Strikes . . . Strikes . . . Strikes." The s echoes later in "sea and sky/ Shall" The r sound is heard in "I remember/ I have a rendezvous at Plymouth Rock." Assonance appears in "Seventh of December," "Harbor's dawn," "peace of seas that thieve," "talons of the mad harpoon," "ruse/ . . . ruins, and "Of sea and sky/ Shall live with me/ Till the day I die." "Rendezvous," "freshness," "dawn," "thieve," "spawn," "black," and "lagoon" connote meaning and appeal to the senses, charging the passage with emotion.

Personification is another poetic device used in these lines. The poet has a "rendezvous with America"; Pearl Harbor's dawn has a "maiden freshness," with its connotation of Aurora; the mad harpoon has "talons"; the typhoon seethes with "fury." The three successive

similes, in which anaphora is used with the repetition of "Strikes like," intensify the impact of the lines. The imagery appeals to almost all of the senses.

Parts IX and X are free verse. The former is composed of twenty lines and the latter of sixteen. The sections personify the anatomical makeup of America. The first two examples of personification here are not as successful as the latter two, in which the analogy is much clearer:

. . . the brows of mountains
 And the breasts of rivers
 And the flanks of prairies
 And the wombs of valleys. . . .

(p. 11)

He lists in Whitmanesque style her melodies, using an alternating in-
and pattern to set up the parallelism:

In the masculine allegro of factories
 And the blues rhapsody of express trains,
 In the bass crescendo of power dams
 And the nocturne adagio of river boats,
 In the sound and fury of threshing machines
 And the clarinetting needles of textile mills,
 In the fortissimo hammers of shipyards
 And the diatonic picks of coal mines,
 In the oboe rhythms of cotton gins

And the sharpened notes of salmon traps,
 In the belting harmonics of lumber camps
 And the drumming derricks of oil fields. . . .

(pp. 11-12)

The poet's interest in music is obvious in the content of this stanza, as in much of his poetry, as well as in the deft manipulation of rhythm. In the following passage, which concludes the poem, he combines personification and the simile to describe the physical attributes of America:

America stands
 Granite-footed as the Rocky Mountains
 Beaten by the whirlpool belts of wet winds,
 Deep-chested as the Appalachians
 Sunning valleys in the palms of their hands,
 Tough-tendoned as the Cumberlands
 Shouldering the truck caravans of US 40,
 Clean-flanked as the lavender walls of Palo Duro
 Washed by the living airs of canyon rivers,
 Eagle-hearted as the Pacific redwoods
 Uprearing their heads in the dawns and dusks of ages.

(p. 12)

Again, his interest in parallelism of construction and use of synonyms shows up. An early example of this trait appears in the forceful verbs and verbals in this stanza.

"Dark Symphony," Tolson's most popular poem in Rendezvous, reflects his interest in music. The poem was eventually set to music by Earl Robinson, composer of "Ballad for Americans." A literary reviewer for the Los Angeles Times said of "Dark Symphony," "It not only voices the ideal of our times; it is also alive with what makes poetry for most of us--and that is music."⁹

Section I, Allegro Moderato, consists of three quatrains of iambic pentameter with an ABAB rhyme pattern. It sets the tone for the poem. The protagonist is the American Negro, who owns his heritage proudly, proclaiming that he is the victim, not the villain, in American history. The poem opens by calling attention to an unsung black American hero:

Black Crispus Attucks taught

Us how to die

Before white Patrick Henry's bugle breath

Uttered the vertical

Transmitting cry:

"Yea, give me liberty or give me death."

(p. 37)

The line placement attracts the eye, as the last words of lines one and three drop to form half-lines for emphasis. The contrast of "Black Crispus Attucks" and "White Patrick Henry" also establishes the theme of the poem: the black man's contribution to his country despite years of abuse at the hands of the white man, and his gradual

evolution to his rightful place in the sun. The juxtaposition of history and literature--"No Banquo's ghost can rise/ Against us now" (p. 37)--continues to characterize Tolson's poetry, as does vivid imagery: "Men black and strong . . . / Loin-girt with faith that worms equate the wrong/ And dust is purged to create brotherhood."

Part II, Lento Grave, slows to a rhythmical, unrhymed fourteen-line section containing many unstressed syllables and long, melodious vowel sounds, as the picture of his inhumanity is drawn for the white man:

The centuries-old pathos in our voices
 Saddens the great white world,
 And the wizardry of our dusky rhythms
 Conjures up shadow-shapes of ante-bellum years:
 Black slaves singing One More River to Cross
 In the torture tombs of slave-ships,
 Black slaves singing Steal Away to Jesus
 In jungle-swamps. . . .

(pp. 37-38)

Emotion and sympathy are evoked in this passage laden with stylistic devices. The alliterative "centuries . . . Saddens," "shadow-shapes," "slaves singing" (repeated five times), "slave-ships"; "white world . . . wizardry"; "torture-tombs" and the onomatopoeic "pathos," "saddens," "wizardry," "shadow-shapes" are some of these effects. The allusion to spirituals, with their Biblical connotations of

the children of Israel under their Egyptian captors blends smoothly with the reference to the white masters as "Southern Pharaohs" (p. 38).

Part III, Andante Sostenuo, forms the transition from the black slaves who sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot/ In cabins of death" to their dark-skinned descendants who cannot forget. Tolson had written this part when he was in high school. Composed of three iambic trimeter eight-line stanzas with an ABCBDEFE rhyme pattern, the section builds with the repetition of "They tell us to forget" throughout the first two stanzas, employing emphatic variation to effect the climax with the repetition of the question in stanza three: "Oh, how can we forget?"

They tell us to forget
 The Golgotha we tread. . .
 We who are scourged with hate,
 A price upon our head.
 They who have shackled us
 Require of us a song,
 They who have wasted us
 Bid us condone the wrong.

They tell us to forget
 Democracy is spurned.
 They tell us to forget
 The Bill of Rights is burned.

Three hundred years we slaved,
 We slave and suffer yet:
 Though flesh and bone rebel,
 They tell us to forget!

Oh, how can we forget
 Our human rights denied?

Oh, how can we forget
 Our manhood crucified?

When Justice is profaned
 And plea with curse is met,

When Freedom's gates are barred,
 Oh, how can we forget?

(pp. 38-39)

As the section title indicates, the tempo picks up in Part IV, Tempo Primo, which describes what was in 1944 more an ideal than a reality--the New Negro, who "strides upon the continent/ In seven league boots . . ." (p. 39). He is the son of Nat Turner, Joseph Cinquez, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman. He is proud of his ancestors, who lived to build this country and died to save it. Appropriately, free verse is employed in the four-part section, the last two parts of which characterize the New Negro:

His giant hands fling murals upon high chambers,
 His drama teaches a world to laugh and weep,
 His music leads continents captive,
 His voice thunders the Brotherhood of Labor,
 His science creates seven wonders,
 His Republic of Letters challenges the Negro-baiters.

The New Negro,
 Hard-muscled, Fascist-hating, Democracy-ensouled,
 Strides in seven-league boots
 Along the Highway of Today
 Toward the Promised Land of Tomorrow!

(p. 40)

Parallelism dominates the various stylistic devices used here. The long list of synonyms, similar to the one in the concluding section of "Rendezvous With America," appears in the third section: his ancestors "planted" crops, "built" ships, "erected" the Cotton Empire, "flung" railroads, "disemboweled" iron and coal, "tunneled" mountains, "bridged" rivers, "harvested" grain, "hewed" forests, "sentineled" the Thirteen Colonies, "unfurled" the flag, and "fought" for the Republic. Three parallel hyphenated epithets describe the New Negro: "Hard-muscled, Fascist-hating, Democracy-ensouled." Again the part builds to a climax, this time by means of hyperbole, symbol, and allusion, as the New Negro

Strides in seven-league boots

Along the Highway of Today

Toward the Promised Land of Tomorrow!

Here, as in a few other instances in Rendezvous, in emotion-charged lines Tolson turns to conventional phrases which tend toward rhetoric.

Part V, Larghetto, takes a backhanded slap at the failures of white Americans. Each of the four six-line stanzas of rhymed AABBC iambic trimeter and pentameter begins with the lines "None in the land can say/ To us black men Today . . ." (pp. 40-41). The poet then lists events and conditions which Americans would like to forget: the "tractors on their bloody path" in Oklahoma (an allusion to Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath), slums, workers' empty dinner pails, stuffed ballot boxes, smashed stock markets, counterfeit Christianity, Fifth Column plots. None of these, say the poet, are the work of the black man.

In the short concluding section, Tempo di Marcia, the new Negro emerges from the darkness of the past to take his place by the side of his fellow man. This section was perhaps more prophetic than realistic at the time it was written, but Tolson firmly believed in the continuing progress of the black man.

Out of the abysses of Illiteracy,

Through labyrinths of Lies,

Across waste lands of Disease. . .

We advance!

Out of dead-ends of Poverty,
 Through wildernesses of Superstition,
 Across barricades of Jim Crowism. . .
 We advance!

(pp. 41-42)

One of the principal causes which he espoused throughout his life is that of the common man. In the 1930's he wrote, ". . . I'm interested in the masses of men and women. And I feel better. I feel free. I sleep at night. I love everybody, in spite of the fact that you see me kicking the ask-me-no-questions of snobs and hypocrites and exploiters. I'm not fighting them personally. I'm fighting the ideas they represent--the dollar civilization they represent."¹¹ After a 1945 interview with Tolson, a reporter wrote, "He believes that Negroes must throw in their lot with the struggling masses and not isolate themselves on little islands of nationalism."¹² And only a year before his death he stated, "My approach is social . . . I am just as concerned by poverty among whites as among black folk. Blacks will never have genuine civil rights in the South, for example, until the white lower classes have been raised up and educated."¹³ It is no accident that the climactic lines of "Dark Symphony," a poem which "commemorates eighty years of Negro freedom,"¹⁴ state, "With the Peoples of the World. . . / We advance!"

Of the poems "Rendezvous With America" and "Dark Symphony," Nathaniel Tillman wrote,

Professor Tolson in his two sustained efforts, "Rendezvous With America" and "Dark Symphony," catches the full and free rhythmic swing and the shifting tempo of the verses of Walt Whitman--or of the late Stephen Vincent Benet. Both poems exhibit genuine poetic feeling, facility of expression, and vividness. The title poem, which is especially strong in imagery, is so apt an interpretation of and challenge to America that it deserves a lasting place in the anthologies of American literature.¹⁵

These two poems, which are the best-known ones in his first book, employ the ode form on which he expanded in his two later books. Both Libretto and Harlem Gallery are long odes, though not conventional in form or technique.

A poem which Tolson almost always included whenever he presented a program of his poetry is the only ballad in Rendezvous, "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake." He would sometimes introduce the poem by informing the audience with pride that poet-critic Paul Engle had considered it the best poem in the book. In the ballad, Tolson makes use of a legend about the Apaches, who on occasion tortured their white prisoners by staking them on the desert directly in front of a rattlesnake with a rock tied on its tail. The characters rise to the level of symbols in the ballad, a story within a story, which is narrated as a group of sharecroppers, both black and white, talk of

what they have seen and heard. The story, like Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, is so intense that it requires a narrator to set up aesthetic distance and to convey a sense of reality. The point of view is established in the two opening stanzas which are repeated as the two concluding stanzas:

The sharecroppers sat

In the Delta night;

Many were black,

And many were white.

And this is the tale

From the bearded mouth

Of the dreamer who saw

Green lands in the South.

The Apaches stake

On the desert sands

The blond man's feet

And the blond man's hands.

He curses and prays

And tugs apace.

The Apaches laugh

And spit in his face.

The blond man looks

With gibbering breath
At the diamond coils
And the fangs of death.

The chief ties a rock
To the rattler's tail.
The blond man's blood
Congeals like hail,

The diamond head
Hisses and pries.

The horny tail
The rock defies.

As custom wills,
Bent like a bow,

The red chief stoops
And taunts his foe.

A madness crawls
In the rattler's brain:
The naked white thing
Is the cause of its pain.

At every lurch
The blond man dies.
Eternity ticks

Behind the eyes.

In the desert world

A scream tears space

As the rattler strikes

The blond man's face.

Five miles away

The Apaches laugh

Like a frozen wind

In a crib of chaff.

The blond man lies

Like a bar of lead.

No hiss or laugh

Can vex the dead.

The desert holds

In its frying pan

The bones of a snake

And the bones of a man.

And many a thing

With a rock on its tail

Kills the nearest thing

And dies by the trail.

The sharecroppers sat
In the Delta night;
Many were black,
And many were white.

And this is the tale
From the bearded mouth
Of the dreamer who saw
Green lands in the South.

(pp. 53-55)

The theme, made explicit in stanza fifteen, is quite appropriate to the 1960's, when riots in Watts, Detroit, Newark, Chicago, and other big cities are bringing bloodshed and destruction to revolutionaries and those around them, as Dr. M. B. Tolson, Jr., pointed out. ¹⁶ The poet was militant in the sense that he worked and spoke out for the rights of oppressed peoples at a time when his actions could have resulted in his being beaten or lynched. But he recognized hatred and bitterness as diseases which not only maim and kill but are self-destructive, and "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake" symbolically relates this belief.

The iambic and anapestic dimeter quatrains contain vivid imagery wrought in unforgettable detail. The senses respond to the gripping narrative as the naked white man--staked, spit upon, gibbering with terror--watches the rattler writhe, coil, lurch at his face. Figurative language is used skillfully, as the similes, metaphors, and

personification illustrate: the Apaches laugh "like a frozen wind/
 In a crib of chaff" the blond man lies "like a bar of lead"; "Eternity
 ticks" behind his eyes; the desert holds "in its frying-pan/ The bones
 of a snake/ And the bones of a man." Unity, simplicity of narrative,
 connotative detail, and symbolism characterize the ballad, which has
 appeal for many admirers of Tolson's work.

Arthur E. Burke wrote of the poems in Rendezvous: "He
 [Tolson] has the knack of epitomizing the significant experiences of
 man and of making these throb with well-controlled drama
 This suggests that his genius lies in the dramatic and lyrical
 veins" Though Burke criticizes Tolson's inability to
 achieve "sufficient flexibility" in his Shakespearean sonnets, point-
 ing out that "In form he is mechanical, in matter graphically
 succinct, and never obscure,"¹⁶ one successful poem in this group is
 "A Hamlet Rives Us." It sweeps the reader along with the pro-
 tagonist, who searches desperately and unsuccessfully for the words
 to say to a friend suffering bereavement:

I saw him faltering toward me in the street:
 His eyes emptied of living, his grief unshed.
 Pain pitted my heart and meshed my doubtful feet,
 As memory's alcove revealed his loved one dead.
 Our sorrows mated then, for I had lost

The next of kin in the fogland of the year.
 And yet a Hamlet rives us when the frost
 Of death comes like a specter buccaneer.

I must console him in this awful hour:

It is the wise and decent thing to do.

Embarrassed, helpless, I was thieved of power
 To utter the tags tragedy ordained untrue.

My friend passed by, unseeing in his grief;
 And the lash of conscience gave me sweet relief.

(p. 63)

The literary allusion is the mark of much of Tolson's poetry. The line "a Hamlet rives us when the frost/ Of death comes like a specter buccaneer" and others of its quality prompted critic Margaret Walker, winner of the 1942 Yale Poetry Award, to write of the "arresting images" in Rendezvous.

17

Although the poems in Rendezvous take up many subjects, most of them either center on or refer to the prejudice with which the black American has had to contend for generations. Tolson knew well the danger a minority poet faces in dealing with the subject of race, and he accepted the challenge: "If a poet puts a social, political, or religious idea in his poem, the critic has a right to test its maturity or validity, just as I have a right to pass judgment on the material a carpenter uses. But no one has a right to tell the poet what idea

to use. " 18

A poem which typifies Tolson's approach to racial discrimination is "The Town Fathers." This poem grew out of his experiences as a resident of South Texas, where he saw the sign of which the poem tells. Several of the poems in Rendezvous tend toward rhetoric, but the irony, understatement, humor, and characterization of these lines make clear the difference between propaganda and poetry:

At the Courthouse Square

On the Fourth of July,

Beneath Old Glory's

Pyrotechnic sky,

The town fathers met,

Minus Bible and rye.

Against the statue

Of Confederate dead

The Mayor spat

His snuff and said,

"We need a slogan!"

And he palmed his head.

The Sheriff's idioms

Dynamited assent.

The Judge croaked a phrase

Latinistically bent.

And the Mayor pondered

With official intent.

On a neon billboard,

As high as a steeple,

The travelers puzzle

The amazing sequel:

The Blackest Land

And The Whitest People.

(p. 22)

At least two reviewers of Rendezvous With America pointed out the differences between Tolson and other Negro poets, particularly Dunbar, whose poetry Tolson had recited "all over Iowa" as a school-boy and whose work he had imitated as a young poet. Nathaniel Tillman wrote, "Much of the promise indicated in the best of the formal English poems of Dunbar reaches its fulfillment in the poetry of Professor Tolson."¹⁹ A Pittsburg Courier review states candidly, "The two Negro poets, Dunbar and Tolson, are as unlike as Edgar Guest and Archibald MacLeish. Tolson is a significant intellect, a multicultural citizen of the world. He is Shostakovich in verse."²⁰ There were other glowing reviews. The Negro novelist Richard Wright said, "Tolson's poetic lines and images sing, affirm, reject, predict and judge. His vision is informed by the core of Negro experience in America, and his poetry is direct and humanistic. All history, from Genesis to Munich, is his domain."²¹ His former student at

Wiley College, James Farmer, later Director of CORE and Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, hailed him as "the dark Whitman."²² Margaret Walker, former editor of Common Ground and a poet-critic, evaluated him as "a poet to be reckoned with by all poets."²³

Good reviews outside the Negro press include Robert Hillyer's statement in the New York Times Book Review that Tolson is "a good poet and a good craftsman" whose versification is "unusually deft."²⁴

Of Rendezvous William Rose Benet wrote in Saturday Review:

Mr. Tolson's book is remarkable He not only is an exemplar of the finest qualities of his race, but a poet of powerful rhythm and original language. You have only to begin that remarkable poem, "The Bard of Addis Ababa":

Out of the green glooms of Dambassa
Trots the massive yellow dog,
His prowlike jaws, his forehead
Scarred like an axman's log,
His growls presaging a menace
Like a fog-horn in a fog.²⁵

Such comments should have been heady wine for the heretofore unrecognized poet. His first book was a success according to the reviewers. But Tolson was not one to rest content for long. He knew that a new school of poetry had emerged and was gaining acceptance

among readers, having been already accepted by poets. He had followed with interest the increasing popularity of those poets who were becoming the acknowledged spokesmen for the New Poetry: Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and--though his technique differed markedly from the others--Frost. Most of the poetry in Rendezvous reflects the influence of poets from earlier periods, but Tolson's interest in experimentation is evident. Along with Joyce and the early Yeats, he shared a liking for "hypnotic undulations of language."²⁶ He used many literary and historical allusions, displaying special learning in diverse areas much like Pound and Eliot, particularly in their earlier work. Many of his characters are common folk, akin to Frost's New Englanders, and frequently the poems express a homespun philosophy with Frostian whimsy and wit. The road which he was deciding to take is indicated clearly in notes for a speech he was preparing to give at a small Negro college in Kentucky some five years after the publication of Rendezvous.

Now the time has come for a New Negro Poetry for the New Negro. The most difficult thing to do today is to write modern poetry. Why? It is the acme of the intellectual. Longfellow, Whittier, Milton, Tennyson, and Poe are no longer the poets held in high repute. The standard of poetry has changed completely. Negroes must become aware of this. This is the age of T. S. Eliot, who just won the Nobel Prize in Literature.²⁷ If you know

Shakespeare from A to Z, it does not mean you can read one line of T. S. Eliot! Imitation must be in technique only. We have a rich heritage of folklore and history. We are a part of America. We are a part of the world. Our native symbols must be lifted into the universal. Yes, we must study the techniques of Robert Lowell, Dylan Thomas, Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Karl Shapiro, W. H. Auden. The greatest revolution has not been in science but in poetry. We must study such magazines as Partisan Review, the Sewanee Review, Accent, and the Virginia Quarterly. We must read such critics as Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Stephen Spender, George Dillon and Kenneth Burke.

These observations reveal the attitude which was the shaping force of the technique to emerge in Libretto for the Republic of Liberia in 1953. Rendezvous, he realized, was not the work which would establish a niche for him in American literature. On the back of an envelope among his notes is scribbled this description of an poet:

Not satisfied

with fire, water, earth, and air,
the poet seeks a fifth essence on
the astral stair.

NOTES

- ¹Published in Common Ground (Summer 1942), pp. 3-9.
- ²See Appendix A.
- ³Unpublished notes.
- ⁴From New Adventures into Poetry (quotation among Tolson's notes).
- ⁵"The Poet Speaks," Phylon, V, No. 4 (Winter 1944), 391.
- ⁶"Among the New Volumes of Verse," December 10, 1944, p. 29.
- ⁷Arts and Sciences Banquet, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, February, 1966.
- ⁸J. K., "Unprejudiced Poems," Raleigh (North Carolina) Observer, October 8, 1944.
- ⁹"Two Powerful Negro Poets," Saturday Review (March 24, 1945), p. 35.

¹⁰Quoted in "Wiley English Professor Writes Best Seller,"
Wiley (Marshall, Texas) Reporter, May, 1945.

¹¹"Caviar and Cabbages," Washington Tribune, November 26,
1938.

¹²Raymona Lowe, "Poem 'Rendezvous With America' Wins Fame
for Melvin Tolson," Chicago Defender, New York Bureau, February
24, 1945.

¹³Lecture, Oklahoma Poetry Society, Oklahoma City Art Center,
July 25, 1965.

¹⁴Cut #C, p. 1. Manuscript for tape made for University of
Wisconsin Educational Radio Station, March 8, 1965.

¹⁵"The Poet Speaks," p. 390.

¹⁶"Book Review: Lyrico-Dramatic," The Crisis (January 1945),
p. 61.

¹⁷New Adventures into Poetry.

¹⁸Tolson's unpublished notes.

¹⁹"The Poet Speaks," p. 389.

²⁰P. L. Prattis (n. d.). Quotation among Tolson's notes.

²¹Tolson's unpublished notes.

²²Equality (n. d.). Quotation among Tolson's notes.

²³New Adventures into Poetry.

²⁴Tolson's unpublished notes.

²⁵"Two Powerful Negro Poets," p. 35.

²⁶Richard Ellmann, Eminent Domain (New York, 1967), p. 35.

²⁷Eliot won the Nobel Prize in 1954, so it is the author's

assumption that these comments were written between 1948 and 1950.

CHAPTER III

LIBRETTO FOR THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

In 1947 the Liberian government commissioned Tolson poet laureate of Liberia. He began work immediately on a poem in honor of the African Republic and completed it within a year. A letter from George Dillon, one of the editors of Poetry magazine, dated September 27, 1948, indicates that the poet had submitted the poem to him for consideration. Dillon wrote Tolson that the poem was "a very good performance, much stronger than we would expect such an occasional poem to be." The editorial staff suggested that the last stanza of the first section and the entire last section did not seem "good enough for the rest." They commended particularly the "new imagery," the "nice sense of disciplined rhythm," and the management of the "vivid and interesting" historical allusions. Dillon explained that because they were overstocked at the time and the poem was long, the three editors had not given it the unanimous vote necessary for publication.¹

Tolson continued to work on the ode to Liberia. In 1950, Poetry magazine, edited by Karl Shapiro, featured one section of the Libretto for the Republic of Liberia. Dodd, Mead, and Company,

publishers of Rendezvous With America, refused to publish the occasional poem about an obscure little country. Twayne Publishers brought out the book in 1953, six years after Tolson's appointment as poet laureate of Liberia. Those six years mark one of the most important stages of Tolson's development as a modern poet.

One person who exerted considerable influence on his technique at this time might have helped him determine his course stylistically thirty years earlier had circumstances been different. As a freshman at Fisk University in 1919, Tolson was just across the city from Vanderbilt University, where the leaders of the Fugitive group-- John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren--were inaugurating the Southern literary renaissance.

Several years later, through reading the "little magazine," Tolson became aware of the importance of the work of these sixteen poets² who met frequently from 1915 to 1928 to read and discuss their work and to publish The Fugitive, a journal devoted primarily to their poetry. He often thought how fortunate he would have been could he have participated in this creative writing venture, which "precipitated quarrels, arguments, and experiments that caused a group of talented men to interact upon each other and, finally, to share in an experience of reality which has provided one of the major insights in modern literature."³

As it was, his introduction to the influential voices in twentieth-century poetry resulted not from any direction or interaction with

other poets but from his intensive reading, which was slowly shaping his ideas about twentieth-century poetry. The following year when he stumbled across Sandburg's "Chicago," he obeyed his professor's instructions to go back to the Romantics and Victorians, but when, a few years later, he picked up a copy of Eliot's "The Waste Land" in a New York bookstore, he knew for sure that his course lay ahead rather than in the past.

Eventually he found his way to the mainstream of modern poetry, but the journey of the solitary student was a long and tedious one. Now, three decades after he had unknowingly crossed paths with the group of young poets in Nashville, Tennessee, he sent the manuscript of Libretto to Allen Tate, one of the original Fugitives and a leader in the New Poetry Movement, with the request that he write a Preface for it. Tate read the manuscript and returned it, saying that he was not interested in the propaganda of a Negro poet.

Tolson could have reacted with bitterness to the Southerner's blunt rejection, claiming that he was prejudiced. Instead he realized that the astute critic had pinpointed a weakness which he himself had often criticized in the work of Negro poets. For the next year he concentrated on the style of modern poets and revised his technique in Libretto. Guided by his "three S's of Parnassus," he turned the propaganda which had offended Tate into symbols and far-ranging literary and historical allusions. Then he sent the Libretto back to him.⁴

The Preface which Allen Tate wrote for the Libretto for the Republic of Liberia states in part, ". . .there is a great gift for language, a profound historical sense, and a first-rate intelligence at work in this poem from first to last For the first time, it seems to me, a Negro poet has assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time, and, by implication, the language of the Anglo-American poetic tradition."⁵

Tate's endorsement pleased Tolson very much. At the same time, he could not resist chuckling as he pointed out parallel passages in his original manuscript and the revised Libretto to Mrs. Tolson. Tate's objection to the poem had made clear to him that in technique lay the answer to the dilemma which plagued him as an Afro-American poet whose integrity demanded that he be true both to his heritage and to the standard of artistic excellence.

Tate's evaluation of Tolson affirms that he had satisfied the critic's requirement of making "the main thing . . . the poetry, if one is a poet, whatever one's color may be." He states,

I think that Mr. Tolson has assumed this; and the assumption, I gather, has made him not less but more intensely Negro in his apprehension of the world than any of his contemporaries, or any that I have read.

But by becoming more intensely Negro he seems to me to dismiss the entire problem, so far as poetry is concerned, by putting it in its properly subordinate place.

In the end I found I was reading Libretto for the Republic of Liberia not because Mr. Tolson is a Negro but because he is a poet, not because the poem has a "Negro subject" but because it is about the world of all men. And this subject is not merely asserted; it is embodied in a rich and complex language and realized in terms of the poetic imagination.⁶

Tolson had always said that to emphasize the how does not de-emphasize the what, but he managed to shift the emphasis from the what to the how sufficiently in his revision of Libretto to win the commendation of the influential critic.⁷

The Libretto is a long ode consisting of eight sections named for the diatonic scale: Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, Do. The poem opens with the question Liberia? The remaining 769 lines provide the answer. Although the poem concerns the nation of Liberia specifically, it pursues some of the themes treated in Rendezvous With America: racial prejudice, exploitation of the black man by the white man, and the accusation of Gertrude Stein that the Negro "suffers from Nothingness," themes which continue in Harlem Gallery. In Libretto, even more than in the later Harlem Gallery,

Idea and image,

form and content,

blend like pigment with pigment
in a flesh color.⁸

The themes and sociological and philosophical beliefs of the poet did not change in the nine-year interval, but stylistic effects which were developing in Rendezvous--allusions, symbolism, the metaphor, the "three S's of Parnassus"--now assume a major role. An additional concept of form emerges as the spine of the work. Tolson looked upon Hart Crane's The Bridge as the greatest modern ode of the English language, but he felt it had failed. To avoid this pitfall he had to come to a full understanding of climax, a partial meaning of which had escaped him through the years. As he planned his ode, he thought long about climax, and suddenly he recalled that the word was a derivative of the Greek word meaning ladder. For the first time, the concept was clear. The poet snares the reader's interest on the first rung of the ladder; each rung is one step higher; all are essential. When the poet steps on the bottom rung and looks up, he may not know what the seventh rung will be. He is like a man in a tunnel who sees the light at the end. It may be flashlight or moonlight. He cannot tell until he moves closer to it.⁹

With this revelation in mind, Tolson conceived the plan for Libretto. Each of the eight sections named for the scale would be a rung on the ladder, constituting the climax. Out of metrical diversity would come originality of form. His "three-S" formula would light the way. His thorough grounding in grammar would help to keep him from

stumbling stylistically.

The initial "Do" section of Libretto consists of seven similarly-constructed eight-line stanzas. The first line of each is the italicized question Liberia? The centered, balanced lines capture the eye.

Liberia?

No micro-footnote in a bunioned book

Homed by a pendant

With a gelded look:

You are

The ladder of survival dawn men saw

In the quicksilver sparrow that slips

The eagle's claw!

(ll. 1-8)

Various critics have commented on the felicity of the concluding symbol in this stanza. In an article entitled "The Quicksilver Sparrow of M. B. Tolson," Dan McCall speaks of the "extraordinary beauty of the opening image."¹⁰ Even Tate admits, "On the first page I received a shock in that region where bored scepticism awaits the new manuscript from a poet not clearly identified, when I saw Liberia invoked as ". . . the quicksilver sparrow that slips/ The eagle's claw!"¹¹

To understand the full implication of the metaphor, it is necessary to know something of the history of Liberia, to learn how the Liberian "quicksilver" sparrow slipped the claw of the American

eagle. Charles Morrow Wilson, in his history of Liberia (1947), states that long before 1776 many Americans had begun to consider slavery immoral, and three years before the American Revolution, Samuel Hopkins published in Boston a plan for training freed slaves as colonizers and missionaries for Africa. The slave trade continued, however, and as the number of freed Negroes grew, the problem of the "unkept Africans" began to get out of hand.

In 1818 the American Colonization Society, instituted by missionary groups and semiformally adopted by the legislatures of Maryland and Virginia, dispatched a ship and committee to negotiate for a colony site near Sierra Leone. The next year President James Monroe officially approved purchase from natives of Sherbro Island for a promontory which was to be the Liberian coast. Congress appropriated Federal funds to "colonize and build huts for recaptured slaves and to provide the latter with farming utensils, teachers, arms, and ammunition." On February 6, 1820, the Elizabeth sailed from Philadelphia with eighty-six freed slaves aboard. At Sherbro Island the group learned that the tribesmen would not sell the island site. After a siege of illness on shipboard which claimed thirty-one lives, the survivors were put ashore at the British Settlement near Freetown in Sierra Leone.

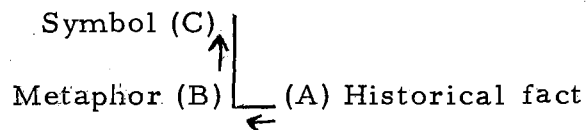
The next year the Society purchased a strip of land 130 miles long and forty miles deep to be used for the settlement of American freed slaves. The little colony survived trials by hunger, fever, and

native attacks. In 1822 a young clergyman, Jehudi Ashmun, and his wife sailed on the brig Strong with thirty-seven freed Negroes for the newly-founded commonwealth. Over one-third of the original settlers had died, and the others were ill. Native tribes were planning an attack on the survivors. Grieved by the death of his wife, the frail Ashmun nevertheless directed the men in building breastworks, and when nine hundred tribesmen overran the camp in November, they were turned back repeatedly by the U. S. Navy cannon manned by Ashmun. After three weeks the natives retired, leaving the ailing colonists to clear land, build fences, and plant crops. Ashmun remained in Liberia until 1828, when he returned to the United States and died a few days later at the age of thirty-five. Somehow the Commonwealth survived jungle disease, hunger, and attacks of hostile natives. On July 26, 1847, it set up a constitutional government similar to that of the United States and became the Republic of Liberia.

England and France continued to make claims on Liberian land, and between 1847 and 1910 Liberia lost forty-four per cent of her land. At this time the United States recognized its moral commitment to the lone African Republic and offered assistance in such areas as education, finance, military training, agronomy, and medicine. Since then Liberia has proved her worth to the United States and the world. In 1918 she joined the Allies. She was providing at least ninety-seven per cent of the rubber in use by the end of World War I and had established essential airfields and harbors for the Allies.¹² Not only had she

"slipped the eagle's claw, " but she had assisted the eagle to fly.

Tolson was pleased with the quicksilver sparrow image, and he sometimes used it in class to illustrate how the symbol originates with the poet. He moves horizontally from the fact to the metaphor; then the idea moves vertically from the metaphor to the symbol at the apex of the angle:



In the Libretto the metaphor is the vehicle on which the opening section moves. Following the question Liberia? which opens each stanza, lines two, three, and four state metaphorically what Liberia is not: "No side-show barker's accident"; "No oil-boiled Barabas"; "No pimple on the chin of Africa"; "No Cobra Pirate of the Question Mark"; "No waste land yet, nor yet a destooled elite." The last four lines of each stanza affirm what Liberia is: a glorious Republic of free men descended from a few disease-ridden ex-slaves cast on the shores of a hostile continent. Liberia is "the ladder of survival dawn"; "the lightning rod of Europe, Canaan's key"; "Libertas flayed and naked by the road/ To Jericho"; "Black Lazarus risen from the White Man's grave"; "American genius uncrowned in Europe's charnel house." "Do" ends with the pronouncement:

You are

The iron nerve of lame and halt and blind,

Liberia and not Liberia,

A moment of the conscience of mankind!

(ll. 53-66)

Forcefulness and strength are effected in these lines in which content and form blend, guided by the "three S's of Parnassus." The centered lines of varied length are unified by the pattern: the initial Liberia?, the metaphors of negation, the metaphors of affirmation. Varied line length combines with an ABCBDEFE rhyme scheme. Figurative language and imagery are prominent. In the opening stanza, alliterative phrases such as "Bnioned book" and "survival dawn men saw/ In the quicksilver sparrow that slips" are frequent. Onomatopoeic effects include "bunioned," "gelded," "dawn," "quicksilver," and "slips," while assonance appears in such groups of words as "micro-footnote . . . / Honed," "footnote . . . book . . . look," "dawn . . . saw . . . sparrow . . . claw," and "quicksilver . . . slips."

The average reader encounters two problems in the opening lines. These problems increase with each page. As one critic points out, ". . . the Libretto is immensely difficult--obscure and referential, composed in several languages and buttressed with now-scholarly, now-sly notes to historiography, anthropology, philosophy, music, odd-lore."¹³ An additional problem is to understand the allusions once the reader tracks them down. The first problem is more difficult than the second, however, for once he knows the

source of the allusion and understands its context, the meaning is usually clear. For this reason Tolson did not regard his work as esoteric, but he did agree to add the seventeen-page note section to Libretto.

Tolson's style in Libretto was not an affirmative answer to the plea of Mallarmé to ignore the masses; "Oh, poets, you have always been proud; now be more than proud, be scornful!"¹⁴ He was neither a scornful person nor a scornful poet, but he did refuse to "write down." Prejudiced against modern poetry at first, he came to believe that "a poet works on a poem as a mathematician works on a problem" --that a first-rate poem does not yield itself totally to the reader on the first reading.¹⁵ He refused to be confined by traditional form.

Instead, he used it as a basis for his experiments with style. This search for a new form, even perhaps a new language, is reminiscent of the new language Rimbaud called upon poets to produce, a language

of the soul, for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colours; thought latching on to thought and pulling. The poet would define the amount of the unknown awakening in the universal soul in his own time: he would produce more than the formulation of his thought or the measurement of his march towards Progress!

Eternal art will have its function, since poets are citizens.

Poetry will no longer rhyme with action: it will be ahead

¹⁶
of it!

Anyone who reads the predictions in the concluding sections of Libretto and recalls that the prophecies were made when Liberia was one of only two Republics in Africa could not but feel that the poem was ahead of its time. Both Ciardi and Shapiro expressed this belief in their criticism.

Though Shapiro claims that "the forms of the Libretto and of Harlem Gallery. . . are the Negro satire upon the poetic tradition of the Eliots and Tates,"¹⁷ it seems more likely that Tolson was interested in proving to the Eliots and Tates that he could write ably on his subject in the style which he believed the best modern poems were being written in. He points out that he spent years analyzing and absorbing the techniques of Pound, Eliot, and other "great Moderns."¹⁸ Their influence is obvious, particularly in the far-ranging allusions which make necessary the section of notes. Even after consulting the notes a conscientious reader keeps an unabridged dictionary close at hand. The first note, for instance, directs the reader to the source of the sparrow-eagle image--Dryden's All For Love, II, ii:

. . . upon my eagle's wings

I bore this wren, till I was tired of soaring,

and now he mounts above me.

To grasp the full connotation of the image, the reader must understand the juxtaposition of the literary allusion, in context, and the history of the founding of Liberia. Many of the other notes are even less helpful.

The line "No corpse of a soul's errand" (l. 11) is noted simply "Cf. Raleigh, The Soul's Errand." Tolson intended the Libretto to be a challenge, even to the intellectual. He wanted to show that he, too, could play the modern poetry game. He told one puzzled reader of Libretto: "My friend, it took me six years to write it. Is it surprising that it takes more than one reading to understand it?"

Following the glorification of Liberia in "Do," the "Re" section describes and defines the Republic "before/ America set the raw foundling on Africa's/ Doorstep" (ll. 59-61). It consists of ten sections of irregular verse. Parts one, four, seven, and ten are irregular couplets. The unifying device of repetition is continued here as the first line of each couplet is "The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted" and the second lines are African proverbs, the first two in native dialect. The first line of the concluding couplet employs emphatic variation as it changes from the "The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted" to "The Good Gray Bard chants no longer in Timbuktu." The six six-line stanzas are not centered, as in "Do," but balance and repetition are secured by the pattern of the number of lines in the stanzas: 2442442442. Parallel construction appears in several lines as well as within some of the lines.

"Re" describes the kingdom of Songhai ("Before Liberia was, Songhai was"), which flourished when Black Askia, an African king who ruled a territory larger than Europe for twenty-four years, "gave the Bengal light/ Of Books the Inn of Court in Songhai . . ."

(ll. 74-75). Black youths studied at the great University of Sankore, where "Footloose professors, chimney sweeps of the skull/ From Europe and Asia, " "white scholars like El-Akit, " and "Black humanists like Bagayogo" made them welcome: "Karibu wee!" Then the Portuguese, the Spanish, and the Arabs razed the African empire. The elements of sound and sense are effective in the last two stanzas of "Re, " which pictures the country after the savage attacks:

And now the hyenas whine among the barren bones
 Of the seventeen sun sultans of Songhai,
 And hooded cobras, hoodless mambas, hiss
 In the gold caverns of Falémé and Bambuk,
 And puff adders, hook scorpions, whisper
 In the weedy corridors of Sankoré. Lia! Lia!"

The Good Gray Bard chants no longer in Timbuktu:

"The maggots fat on yeas and nays of nut empires!"

(ll. 93-100)

Tolson liked the sound of these lines. He enjoyed telling of quoting the line "seventeen sun sultans of Songhai" to Peter Viereck, who had stated at a reception in the Liberian Embassy honoring the poet laureate that there cannot be more than three instances of alliteration or assonance in a line of poetry. These lines abound with alliterative phrases: "barren bones"; "hooded cobras, hoodless mambas, hiss"; and "whisper/ In the weedy corridors." Onomatopoeia is apparent in "whine, " "barren, " "hiss, " "whisper, " and

"Lia!" [to weep]. Assonance is employed freely: "And now . . .
a m o n g t h e b a r r e n b o n e s / O f . . . S o n g h a i!"; "hy e n a s w h i n e"; "su n
s u l t a n s"; "ho o d e d c o b r a s, h o o d l e s s m a m b a s"; "So n g h a i . . .
F a l e m e"; "ca v e r n s o f . . . B a m b u k / A n d p u f a d d e r s"; "ho o k s c o r p i o n s"; "wh i s p e r / I n"; and "we e d y c o r r i d o r s o f S a n k o r e. L i a! L i a!"

A line laden with both alliteration and assonance in this section is

"The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted. "

Powerful imagery marks this stanza: the ear hears, the eye envisions, the blood chills, as the hyenas whine among the skeletons, the cobras and mambas hiss in the caverns, and the puff adders and scorpions whisper in the weedy corridors. The names Songhai, Falémé, Bambuk, and Sankoré are romantic in their appeal to the imagination, enhancing the mystery of the faraway.

The author's notes identify eleven allusions in "Re." The forty-three lines encompass history, literature, and several languages as they move from Pliny to Sagittarius, from Shakespeare to W. E. B. Dubois, from the African proverb "Wanawake wanazaa ovyo" (The women keep having children right and left" to the French pronouncement "Dieu seul est grand," which, according to Tolson's notes at the end of the poem, were the first words of Massillon's exordium delivered at the magnificent funeral of Louis XIV, which brought the congregation to its feet in the cathedral.

There are many striking images in "Re," such as "Burnt warriors and watermen of Songhai/ Tore in bizarreries the uniforms

of Portugal/ And sewed an imperial quilt of tribes" (ll. 62-64);
 "Europe bartered Africa crucifixes for red ivory, / Gewgaws for black
 pearls, pierres d'aigris for green gold" (ll. 68-70); "And the leopard
 Saracen bolted his scimitar into/ The jugular vein of Timbaktu . . ."
 (ll. 91-92).

"Mi" takes up the original plan of American church leaders and others to send some of the freed slaves to Africa. The poet names and characterizes metaphorically, in a word or phrase, various Americans who had a hand in making the arrangements. Robert Finley, "Jehovah's Damasias," played a major role as one of the instigators of the movement to return the ex-slaves to Africa. He "swooped into Pennsylvania Avenue/ To pinion" Henry Clay, the "shuttlecock,"¹⁸ and Bushrod Washington, both of whom served as early presidents of the American Colonization Society. Finley's "magnet yea" also attracted the support of such men as Francis Scott Key, "the hymnist primed to match a frigate's guns"; the influential Bishop Meade, "God's purse"; and anti-slavery reformer Charles Turner Torrey, "the People's clock," a minister who later became a martyr in the cause of abolition.²⁰ Together they worked to effect the decision which "verved/ Black Pilgrim Fathers to Cape Mesurado." The verb verved is one of several instances in which the poet seems to have been captivated by the sound of the word, resulting in a phrase which is hardly inevitable. The poet notes that "That decision's cash/ And credit bought a balm for conscience" (ll. 114-115). Although the

objectives of the Society were ostensibly to introduce Christianity and promote civilization in Africa, one major incentive was to relieve the slave-holding states from the inconvenience of an increase of free blacks. Little did either the white sponsors or the black colonists dream that one day the descendants of the superfluous ex-slaves would assist the United States in winning a war.

The free-verse pattern of "Re" is exchanged in "Mi" for six four-line stanzas of iambic pentameter, unrhymed except for lines two and three in the first stanza. The concluding five lines, italicized for emphasis, draw a sharp contrast between the rather muddled beginning of the struggling colony and the vital role Liberia played in World War II by again providing rubber for the Allies and airfields from which 17,000 bombers a month flew against their enemies:

No linguist of the Braille of prophecy ventured:

The rubber from Liberia shall arm

Free peoples and her airport hinterlands

Let loose the winging grapes of wrath upon

The Desert Fox's cocained nietzscheans

A gosestep from the Gateway of the East!

(ll. 119-124)

Lines from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"--"He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored/ He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword!"--are juxtaposed with the

Liberian story to read, "Let loose the winging grapes of wrath."

The participle winging makes the bombs dropped from the airplanes the modern-day "terrible swift sword."

Sound is important in these lines. There is alliteration in "let loose" and "goosestep from the Gateway"; "onomatopoeia in "loose," "winging," "wrath," and "goosestep"; and assonance in "shall arm" and "Free peoples." In the two concluding lines, the penultimate line is strained in contrast to the smooth final line. Cacophonous initial sounds stress the ugliness of the situation in imagery which is perhaps strained both in idea and sound: "The Desert Fox's cocained nietzscheans / A goosestep from the Gateway of the East!"

The sense element is equally stressed in this section. Aware that one of the tests of a poet is his usage of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, Tolson uses hinterlands to convey the feeling of Liberia's isolation. He makes the noun airport an adjective-- "airport hinterlands" in the war. The alliterative phrase "let loose" is expelled with the force of the arrow it calls to mind. The participle winging intensifies the image. "Grapes of wrath" carries the full connotation in its context in "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and in Steinbeck's novel, Rommel's nickname "Desert Fox" is connotative of a sly animality or bestiality. "Cocained" is forceful, and "goosestep" conjures up the image of the march of the Führer's fanatic followers, though the poet can be seen too obviously at work in this phrase and in the concluding hyperbole: "A goosestep from the Gateway of the East."

The short "Fa" section is Tolson at his best. It was one of the parts of Libretto that he enjoyed reading to audiences and talking about. Composed of three striking symbols of predator nations which attack the young Republic, then rest in preparation for future attacks, the image-packed section illustrates the synchronization of sight, sound, and sense:

A fabulous mosaic log,

The Bola boa lies
gorged to the hinges of his jaws,
eyeless, yet with eyes . . .

in the interlude of peace.

The beaked and pouched assassin sags
on to his corsair rock,
and from his talons swim the blood-
red feathers of a cock . . .

in the interlude of peace.

The tawny typhoon striped with black
torpors in grasses tan:
a doomsday cross, his paws uprear
the leveled skull of a man . . .

in the interlude of peace.

(ll. 125-139)

Selden Rodman says of these lines that the "lyric passages" are "as subtle as they are incisive."²¹ The poet's artistry reveals itself in the spacing and placement of the lines, the parallellism of the symbols and of the choral line, and in the color which heightens the connotation of the images: the "mosaic" log; the "blood-red" feathers which "swim" from the assassin's talons; the "tawny typhoon striped with black torpors in grasses tan."

The section builds from the unnamed victim of the snake to the cock killed by his fellow to man, whose "leveled skull" is mauled by a marauding tiger. Each predator rests "in the interlude of peace." The boa lies gorged; the assassin cock sags onto a rock; the tiger "torpors" in the grass. The lines are rich with alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia. Read orally, the section illustrates the work of both artist and musician. Stanley Hyman recognized Tolson's technique of juxtaposition as having a kinship to the associative organization of the blues. Tolson was at first surprised. He had intended the poem to be quite "literary," but when he studied Libretto carefully, he, too, discovered the syncopation and counterpoint which he had unconsciously incorporated into the poem.²²

In one of his lectures the poet recalled the sources of the metaphors and symbols in the first stanza. Somewhere in his reading he had stumbled across that "wonderfully alliterative name the Bola Boa." Then he read a book about some young men travelling in Africa. They had sat on what they thought was a log--until it moved. Always

interested in animals (Tolson would sometimes tell his audiences that he visited the zoo to learn more about them), he was particularly fascinated by snakes, and many allusions to them appear in his poetry. Mosaic seemed to him to describe the appearance of the boa, and he had selected "the best of all possible adjectives" to describe the boa-- "fabulous." He demonstrated that one cannot say fabulous without opening wide both his mouth and his eyes--a most appropriate facial expression. "Gorged" was more connotative than its synonym "full," while "hinges of his jaws" was simply an accurate biological description. He also warned his audience to watch for the "subterranean" meaning in his work. For instance, "Europe is an empty python in hiding grass" is not a statement about python, he pointed out, nor even a python, but about a python. The symbol of exploitation, the python devours, rests, devours again. Tolson went ahead to elaborate on symbolism as being a trait of Negro spirituals as well as of modern poetry. When the black man sang, "Steal Away to Jesus," he was planning on using the underground railroad for transportation. Other characteristics which modern poetry and Negro spirituals share include such esoteric figurative language and juxtaposition of Biblical and folk materials of humor or satire and pathos.

Tolson's manipulation of poetic devices, such as symbolism, alliteration, assonance (the a's in "fabulous mosaic"; the o's in "mosaic log/ the Bola boa lies/ gorged"; the short and long i sounds in "hinges of his jaws/ eyeless, yet with eyes"), and onomatopoeia

enrich the section. The meter and rhyme also enhance the effectiveness of the sound, while he achieves tone variation by changing from the aggressive active in each stanza to the subdued passive in the ironic choral line "in the interlude of peace."

"Sol" is the most interesting section of the Libretto to many readers because of the mixture of humor, irony, and wisdom in the thirty African proverbs it contains. The section begins by introducing the "horned American dilemma"--what to do with the freed Negro slaves--a dilemma which white "Christian" Americans sought to solve by readying for sail to Africa the brig Elizabeth, which

. . . flaunts her stern

At auction blocks with the eyes of Cain

And down-the-river sjamboks.

Soon the ship crosses the Middle Passage, where "the sharks wax fattest and the stench/ Goads God to holds his nose!" (ll. 153-154). Elijah Johnson, courageous black leader of the colonists, wonders, "How long? How long? How long?"

The middle section of "Sol" consists of the proverbs, handed down through the centuries by the tribal Griot, the walking encyclopedia who carried in his head the legends and lore of his people. Most of the proverbs which appear here are in the form in which they were conceived.²³ Several of them, which Tolson described as "intelligence working on experience," have racial implications:

"Africa is a rubber ball;
 the harder you dash it to the ground,
 the higher it will rise.

(ll. 173-175)

". . . God saves the black
 man's soul but not his buttocks from
 the white man's lash

(ll. 200-202)

". . . The white man solves
 between white sheets his black
 "problem. Where would the rich cream be
 without skim milk?"

(ll. 207-210)

Such sayings, he emphasized, refute Gertrude Stein's charge that the Negro suffers from Nothingness.

The section closes with Elijah Johnson musing on the outcome of the venture which had already taken so many lives. But the alternative is worse, no matter what the odds. The "benediction" of the poet, as he raises the Liberian story into the universal, is,

And every ark awaits its raven,
 Its vesper dove with an olive-leaf,
 Its rainbow over Ararat.

(ll. 224-226)

The form of "Sol" differs from that of the preceding sections. As the excerpts demonstrate, it consists of twenty-nine unrhymed three-line stanzas. Lines one and two are predominantly iambic tetrameter and line three iambic trimeter. There is much symbolism and figurative language, particularly in the proverbs. Phrases from Old Gaelic, French, and native African dialect appear in the section, which contains many Biblical allusions.

"Ti" is one of the most difficult sections of the poem in terms of juxtaposition, condensation, and allusions to dozens of sources in several languages. Opening with a five-line centered stanza with an ABCDB rhyme scheme, the sixth line is the italicized Biblical "Selah!" which concludes each stanza in the section. The twelve remaining stanzas consist of centered free-verse lines ranging from ten to twenty-seven lines in length.

The initial stanza of "Ti" invokes the "Calendar of the Century" that it may "red-letter the Republic's birth" and grant protection to Liberia. The deceitful "blind men" stand between England and France, nations which no longer have the power to rend Liberia, "making the multitudinous seas incarnadine." The protagonist addresses the Great White World, explaining that "omega hounds/lap up the alpha laugh" and the curse which covered all.

The third stanza opens by calling on Africa, "Mother of Science," admonishing her to remember her history:

O Africa, Mother of Science

. . . lachen mit yastchekes . . .

What dread hand,

to make tripartite one august event,

sundered Gondwanaland?

What dread grasp crushed your biceps and

back upon the rack

chaos of chance and change

fouled in Malebolgean isolation?

What dread elboga shoved your soul

into the tribulum of retardation?

melamin or malanin dies to the world and dies:

Rome casketed herself in Homeric hymns.

Man's culture in bard and Arab lies:

The Jordan flows into the Tiber,

The Yangtze into the Thames,

the Ganges into the Mississippi, the Niger

into the Seine.

Judge of the Nations, spare us: yet,

fool latins, alumni of one school,

on Clochan-na-n'all, say Phew

. . . Lest we forget! Lest we forget! . . .

to dusky peers of Roman, Greek, and Jew.

Selah!

(ll. 273-296)

The second line refers to the black man's courage in the face of pain or death--literally, laughing with needles being stuck in you. Stanley Hyman alluded to this line in The Tangled Bush, pointing out that self-destructive humor, what the Germans call "Galgen-humor" or gallows-humor is characteristic of all oppressed peoples.²⁴ The third and sixth lines recall Blake's "The Tiger." The "one august event" is a phrase lifted from Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain;" a poem which gives an ironic account of the luxury liner Titanic ramming an iceberg on her maiden voyage. The stanza ends with the familiar lines from Kipling's "Recessional"--"Lest we forget! Lest we forget!" The poet's objective in referring to many literatures, many histories, many geographical locations, many languages, is to make the Libretto universal. Ciardi, who is highly complimentary of Tolson's work, points out, however, that "There are times when Tolson's heaping on of image after image and of phrases from German, Spanish, French, and from African languages as well, leaves the reader knocked out: too much is happening too fast, and the result seems to be not exaltation but dizziness."²⁵ Such lines are these which take up the relationship of the poet to the masses. They exhibit internal rhyme and a play on the word mass: "enmesh in ethos, in masoreth, the poet's flesh/ intone the Mass of the class as the requiem of the mass . . ." (ll. 310-311). The State, "helled in by Sancho's fears/ of the bitter hug. of the Great Fear, Not-To-Be, " (ll. 331-332) has always hung the curtain--at times an iron curtain. The one who doubts "the white book's colophon/ is Truth's . . .

wars/ the black flower T of doomed Laocoon" (ll. 338-340). There have always been the two worlds of the Many and the Few, and Tolson's sympathy is with the Many, though his audience is undoubtedly the Few. The Age has such "kinks internal and global stinks" that the speaker would prefer to be a dog, a monkey, or a hog. It is indeed difficult for Africans, "Peoples of the Brinks," to have the wisdom to solve "the riddle of/ the Red Enigma and the White Sphinx" (ll. 376-377).

Just as Tolson lifts "Pasez" from the Hebrew (his note explains that this is a vertical line that occurs about 480 times in the Bible and is the most mysterious sign in the literature) so he turns to Spanish-- el grito de Delores--to express the cry for freedom and to French to describe his disillusionment as a result of "poets, disemboweled" and "mulligan truth and lie"--fiers instants promis à la faux (proud moments promised to the scythe). The "little gray cattle," the peasants, cower before the predator twins pomp and power, "Siamese wolves."

The next stanzas begin with parallel statements concerning the distance to the promised land for the masses, the "Hoherer" or the height of spiritual achievement. "The Höhere of Gaea's children/ is beyond the dérèglement de tous les sens . . ." (ll. 403-404). "The Höhere of God's stepchildren/ is beyond the sabotaged world. . . ." (ll. 413-414); "The Höhere of X's children/ is beyond Heralds' College . . ." (ll. 423-425). "Gaea's children," "God's stepchildren," and "X's children" are all "the Many," the masses. Their promised land

is beyond the present-day world, beyond Rimbaud's "dislocation of the senses" or the "maggot democracy." He pleads for all--"En Masse/. . . Christians, Jews, ta ethne. . . (ll. 439-440)." The Shakespearean image of the black Aethiop reaching at the sun is juxtaposed smoothly into stanza twelve with the description of the New African. "Ti" concludes with a picture of the futility of the Many who will never chart and travel a course upward. Lists of names from various languages, along with metaphorical synonyms in English, verify the status of the poor in every land as they travel in circles, for they have no destination..

. . . Today the mass,
the Beast with a Maginot Line in its Brain,
the staircase Avengers of base alloy,
the vile canaille--Gorii! -- the Bastard-rasse,
the uomo qualyque, the hoi barbaroi,
the raya in the Oeil de Boeuf,
the vsechelovek, the descamisados, the hoi polloi,
the Raw from the Coliseum of the Cooked,
Il Duce's Whore, Vardaman's Hound---
unparadised nobodies with maps of Nowhere
ride the merry-go-round!

Selah!

The concluding section, "Do," has three sections. It begins with eleven six-line free verse stanzas in which juxtaposition,

allusions, phrases from foreign languages, and word-concoctions are multiplied. The only punctuation marks are parentheses, hyphens, apostrophes, and periods following abbreviations. There are no capital letters. Foreign phrases appear in every stanza. The lack of form symbolizes the turbulence, disorder, and hopelessness of Liberia during the Age of Exploitation: "the seven trumpets of today's baby boys²⁶ summon peace/ and the walls come tumblin' down (Christ sleeps)."

The poet has fun--partly at the reader's expense--with such stanzas as four, which poses the question "What is Man?"

vexilla regis prodeunt inferni what is man f. r. a. i. tò tí

(a professor of metaphysicotheologicocosmonigology

a tooth puller a pataphysicist in a cloaca of error

a belly's wolf a skull's tabernacle a #13 with stars

a muses' darling a busie bee de sac et de corde

a neighbor's bed-shaker a walking hospital on the walk)

(ll. 508-512)

A part of the fun is the juxtaposition of elements foreign to one another --the pretentiousness of "professor of metaphysicotheologicocosmonigology" (another Pangloss)²⁷ in close combination with "a tooth puller" (also the nickname of the first martyr of Brazilian independence), a "busie bee" followed by a Latin phrase, etc. Preceding the favorite question of Socrates, "Tò tí," is f. r. a. i., a possible interpretation of which is Fellow of the Royal Anthropological

Institute. Tolson's wit, his inclination to spoof, and his extensive use of the metaphor are exhibited in such phrases as "a false pataphysicist in a cloaca of error"--the false physicist is caught in a sewer of his own mistakes. Whereas many of the phrases answering the question "What is man?" reveal a surface meaning through context and connotation (he is "a belly's wolf a skull's tabernacle a #13 with stars), most of these phrases carry a deeper meaning. A note on this line reads,

510 A belly's wolf. Cf. Beaumont and Fletcher, Woman Pleas'd. Also Malley: "Religion is a process of turning your skull into a tabernacle, not of going up to Jerusalem once a year." #13 with stars: James Wilkinson, American general and secret Spanish agent, who sought to establish an empire in the Southwest under his own sword and sceptre.

One twenty-line centered stanza which poses a series of questions about the future of Liberia separates the first section of "Do" from the conclusion. These questions range from "Where is the glory of the mestizo Pharaoh?" to "The black albatross about the white man's neck?" The irony of the question is clear when one recalls the opening statement of the book. Liberia is no "black albatross about the white man's neck" but a "quicksilver sparrow" which has slipped "the eagle's claw."

The first seven stanzas of the concluding section of "Do," in

which appear the prose paragraphs about which most critics of Libretto have commented, begin with the phrase "The Futurafrique . . . ," symbol of the Liberia of the future. Again the "S-Trinity" influences the appearance of the line, the sound of the long vowels and the alliterative and onomatopoeic words, and the imagery of the poetic ride into the future:

The Futurafrique strokes the thighs of Mount Bar-
clay and skis toward the Good-
lowe Straightaway, whose coloratura
ratura sunset is the alpenglow
of cultures in the Shovel head Era
of the Common Man . . .

(ll. 598-603)

Along with the numerous vowels which lengthen the sound in phrases denoting the sleek smoothness of the ride, one notices the number of initial s's and c's in the brief passage: "strokes," "skis," "Straightaway"; "coloratura," "culture," "Common Man."

It is difficult to separate the sound from the sense as the imagery in these lines appeals to the senses of touch and sight primarily. The Futurafrique and Mount Barclay are personified as the "chef d'oeuvre" of Liberian Motors . . . strokes the thigh of Mount Barclay" and "skis" toward the Straightaway. There is joy in the verb-play used to describe the journey of the Futurafrique: it slips, slithers, escalades, idles, volplanes, zooms, zigzags, rockets, arcs,

strokes, skis, glitters, vies, challenges, slices, rend [s],
gut [s]. The United Nations Limited, in the next four stanzas, volts,
careers, horseshoe curves, sheens, quakes, zoom-zooms, and tele-
scopes. Then the "diesel-engined, fourfold-decked, swan-sleek Bula
 Matadi glides, swivels, and whirs. Nor has the poet exhausted his
 stockpile of synonyms, for "Le Premier des Noirs, of Pan-African
 Airways" whirs, meteors, waltzes, curvets, and eagles along its
 tracks. These verbs connote innumerable images of the Africa-to-be
 and lead to the final nine stanzas of "Do" and of Libretto.

Tate evaluates "Do" as "rhetorically effective" but "not quite
 successful" as poetry. "The last section begins in a six-line stanza
 which is controlled with considerable mastery, but the movement
 breaks down into Whitmanesque prose-paragraphs into which
 Mr. Tolson evidently felt he could toss all the loose ends of history,
 objurgation, and prophecy which the set theme seemed to require of
 him as official poet." He partially softens his criticism with the
 comment that "even this part of the poem is written with great energy"
 and that he points out the defects here only because "the power and
 versatility of the other parts of the poem offset them" and demand
 close attention.²⁸

The final section prophesies--in free verse significantly--an
 Africa which only a visionary could imagine in 1953, an Africa over
 which today fly more than thirty free flags.

The Parliament of African Peoples signets forever

the Recessional of Europe and
trumpets the abolition of itself:
and no nation uses Felis leo or
Aquila heliaca as the emblem
of blut und boden; and the hyenas
whine no more among the bar-
ren bones of the seventeen sun-
set sultans of Songhai; and the
deserts that gave up the ghost
to green pastures chant in the
ears and teeth of the Dog, in
the Rosh Hashana of the Afric
calends: "Honi soit qui mal y
pense!"

In this stanzaic finale the poet picks up the symbols he used in "Re" and envisions a land in which hyenas whine no more among the "barren bones of the seventeen sunset sultans of Songhai" and the deserts transformed into green pastures "chant in the ears and teeth of the Dog: "Shamed be he who thinks ill on it!"

Dan McCall points out that Tolson does not use the "learned allusiveness" characteristic of earlier parts of the poem so much here but rather uses images native to Africa and ends with the celebration of scientific progress in Liberia, a new relationship in which "science

imitates and works with the land, marries nature instead of violating her." Although he criticizes the final section for "looseness" and for lacking complete authority because the poet is not a native African, he says that "Tolson has heralded the Recessional of Europe in terms of great sophistication and power" ²⁹

Of the concluding parts Selden Rodman writes, "The stanzas of the later sections are composed of quotations, proverbs, invocations and cliches rendered in the languages from which they are lifted and explicated (when it suits the author's fancy) in voluminous, pedantic notes." He compares Tolson's style with that of Eliot, noting that their weaknesses are the same, though Tolson's taste "is much more uneven." His criticism, like that of Tate, is tempered by his admiration of the total work: ". . . it is not only by all odds the most considerable poem so far written by an American Negro, but a work of poetic synthesis in the symbolic vein altogether worthy to be discussed in the company of such poems as 'The Waste Land,' 'The Bridge,' and 'Paterson.'" ³⁰

An Australian critic says that Tolson's poetry "too obviously comes via Eliot and Pound." He finds the "inner world of poetry, a story and rhythm" missing in the Libretto, which consists of "encyclopedic erudition, worldshaking utterances, sardonic epigrams. . . ." This unsigned commentary is one of the harshest criticisms in print of any of Tolson's work. It states that his poetry "comes boosted in public by a willing suspension of critical disbelief among American

reviewers towards a Negro who has made the 'modern' grade in poetry" and that his poetry will possibly never be assimilated, even by poets.³¹

Tolson never replied publicly to these criticisms, but in a letter among his notes addressed to Cral Murphy, President, Afro-American Newspapers, Baltimore, Maryland, he reacts to the criticism of his book by a "topnotch Negro critic":

. . . he [the critic] did not review the book: he reviewed his prejudices against modern poetry. Let us look at some of them. He is against "an addendum of notes." This bias started in 1800, when William Wordsworth published the Preface to "Lyrical Ballads." For two hundred years poets have given prefaces or notes to readers. T. S. Elio, the only American poet to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Master of the Super-intellectuals, added notes to his epic, "The Waste Land." David Jones, in that English masterpiece, "The Anabasis," uses notes. Furthermore, these distinguished poets have had their works explained by the best critics in all the little magazines and countless books of criticism. Critics like Empson, the greatest critical reader in the British Empire, and Blackmur, the greatest critical reader in the United States, have not been insulted by the "addendum of notes"; these critics found neither a failure to communicate nor

a patronizing gesture - to quote [the critic] - in the poets I have cited.

.

Now, if one wants to be a modern poet, one must study modern poets - and the greatest - Stevens, Rimbaud, Blok, Eliot, Pound, et al. I have done this for twenty years. Whether I have succeeded or failed, you will have to ask contemporary major poets and critics. . . . ³²

Lorenzo Turner calls Libretto "a triumph of poetry on the grand scale," ³³ and Ciardi says of it, ". . . one feels a force of language and of rhythm as breathtaking as anything in the range of American poetry." ³⁴ Tolson's publisher thought the book might garner the Pulitzer prize. ³⁵ Not only is critical opinion about Libretto somewhat contradictory, but the whole situation surrounding Tolson's selection as poet laureate of Liberia and his writing the occasional poem are paradoxical, as he himself said. He was a Negro poet who was not a Negro writing about a Negro subject which is not Negro: although he is called Negro, he has French and Indian blood in his veins; his subject is Negro in a sense, but the Negro is only one part of the Liberian story.

Three important critics of modern American poetry praised Libretto with the reservation that time was needed to establish it in its true place in American literature. Tate was curious to see the

influence it would have on Negro poetry in the United States.³⁶

Ciardi also recommended Libretto as a book to return to, "for the blast of language and vision is simply too overwhelming for first judgments."³⁷ And twelve years after its publication, Karl Shapiro proclaimed, "The Libretto pulls the rug out from under the poetry of the Academy; on the stylistic level, outpounding Pound, it shocks the learned into a recognition of their own ignorance." He added, however, that at the distance of a decade, it may be "too early for the assimilation of such a poem, even by poets."³⁸

Tolson read the criticism of Libretto with interest. Among his notes is this statement about the New Poetry and critics: "A modern poem is like an iceberg--much of it beneath the surface in shapes of ledges, bulges, crevices, warm and cold edges, colors and shadows of colors, etc. Critics are deep sea divers, exploding the poem. Some have sharper, better technique and equipment than others. They can stay submerged longer than others. For the pressure down there in a work of art may be terrific." Years of reading, contemplation, and analysis had gone into the writing of Libretto. For a time he believed that he had written himself out. If the "horizontal audience" did not respond en masse, if the critics preferred to leave the final evaluation to time, so be it. He had satisfied the requirements he believed to be essential: a work of art must give intelligence a new stance and a good poem should conjure up the ghosts of retrospection

and introspection. He was content to place Libretto on the scales of artistic merit and let Time be the judge.

NOTES

¹ Letter is among Tolson's papers.

² Ransom, Tate, Davidson, Warren, Merrill Moore, Laura Riding, Jesse Wills, Alec B. Stevenson, Walter Clyde Curry, Stanley Johnson, Sidney M. Hirsch, James Frank, William Y. Elliott, William Frierson, Ridley Wills, and Alfred Starr.

³ Louise Cowan, "Introduction," The Fugitive Group (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1968), p. xxiii.

⁴ Dudley Randall, "Portrait of a Poet As Raconteur," Negro Digest, XV, No. 3 (January 1966), p. 56.

⁵ Preface, Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (New York, 1953).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Karl Shapiro, author of the Introduction to Harlem Gallery, attacks Tate's "reasons" for accepting Libretto and claims that Tolson's last two books are "the Negro satire upon the poetic tradition of the Eliots and Tates." See Appendix B.

⁸Harlem Gallery (New York, 1965), p. 54.

⁹"An Evening with M. B. Tolson," Fine Arts Week, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, April 8, 1965.

¹⁰American Quarterly, XVIII, No. 3 (Fall 1966), p. 539.

¹¹Preface, Libretto.

¹²Liberia (New York, 1947), pp. 7-95.

¹³McCall, p. 538.

¹⁴Stephane Mallarmé, "Art for All," 1862, Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters, tr. Bradford Cook (Baltimore, 1965), p. 13; reprinted in "Art as Aristocratic Mystery," The Modern Tradition, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York, 1965), p. 208.

¹⁵Tolson's unpublished notes.

¹⁶Letters to George Izambard and Paul Demeny, 1871. Selected Verses, ed. and tr. Oliver Bernard, 1962, pp. 5-16; reprinted in "The Poet as Revolutionary Seer," The Modern Tradition, p. 204.

¹⁷"Decolonization of American Literature," Wilson Library Bulletin (June 1965), p. 853. See Appendix B.

¹⁸ "A Poet's Odyssey, " Anger, and Beyond, ed. Herbert Hill (New York, 1966), p. 195.

¹⁹ Clay was called the "Great Pacificator" because of his ability to reconcile differences of opinion.

²⁰ "Charles Turner Torrey, " Encyclopedia Americana (New York, 1953), XXVI, 710.

²¹ "On Vistas Undreamt, " New York Times Book Review, LIX, No. 4, January 24, 1954, p. 10.

²² "A Poet's Odyssey," p. 185.

²³ Interview, M. B. Tolson, Jr., September, 1968.

²⁴ New York, 1962, p. 347.

²⁵ John Ciardi, "Recent Verse, " Nation, CLXXVIII (February 27, 1954), 183.

²⁶ According to Tolson's notes, the code words for the A-bombs. The message indicating success in developing the A-bomb read:
"Baby boy born today mother and child doing well. "

²⁷ Professor Pangloss in Voltaire's Candide taught metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology in proving that there is no effect without a cause in this best of all possible worlds (Ch. I, p. 2).

²⁸Preface, Libretto.

²⁹McCall, p. 542.

³⁰"On Vistas Undreamt," p. 10.

³¹James Tulip, "Afro-American Poet - M. B. Tolson,"

Poetry, Australia, No. 10 (June 1966).

³²Letter is dated January 26, 1954. Whether or not it was ever mailed is unknown.

³³"Words for a Vast Music," Poetry, LXXXVI (June 1955), 176.

³⁴"Recent Verse," p. 183.

³⁵Letter from Jacob Steinberg, Managing Editor, Twayne Publishers, Inc., September 21, 1953 (among Tolson's papers).

³⁶Preface, Libretto.

³⁷"Recent Verse," p. 183.

³⁸Introduction, Harlem Gallery.

CHAPTER IV

HARLEM GALLERY: BOOK I, THE CURATOR

Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator is an "autobio-fragment," in the Curator's words, but it would be erroneous to assume that the Curator is Tolson. Often he does speak for the author, but in some instances he does not. In the dialogue about "cream" and "milk" ("Upsilon," pp. 122-126), for example, Doctor Nkomo's arguments for "homogenized milk"--a mixture of the races and a raising of masses --is more synonymous with Tolson's stance expressed in conversations, lectures, newspaper articles, and poetry than the Curator's preference for "cream"--the elite--or his advice to both "taste the milk of the skimmed/ and sip the cream of the skimmers" (p. 125) during this "people's dusk of dawn" (p. 19). In fact, the Curator admits later to himself a "failure of nerve" which makes his African friend Doctor Nkomo the better man ("Phi," p. 133).

The characters in Harlem Gallery are largely imaginary, although many of them had their origin in people Tolson had known. Doctor Nkomo, for instance, is fictitious, but his prototype was a professor with whom Tolson had taught in Marshall, Texas: "As an agnostic alien professor, he almost wrecked Wiley College, proudly

Methodist. . . . Nkomo, African and Africanist, is buried in the
 Black Belt of East Texas. . . ."¹

Of more importance from a literary standpoint than the identity of the characters, however, are the subjects which the Curator and his friends discuss from "Alpha" to "Omega." Their conversations range from philosophy to peeping Toms; their style, from poetry in the modern vein to folk ballads. Always, the focus is on the two subjects which interested Tolson most: the Afro-American and art. Some sections consider these subjects separately, some together. The past, present, and future of the Afro-American is one of the major concerns of the poem. Shapiro points out in the Introduction to Harlem Gallery that a basic theme in both Libretto and Harlem Gallery is "the accusation of Gertrude Stein that the Negro 'suffers from Nothingness.'"² The later poem also treats the plight of the twentieth-century artist--particularly the Negro artist. The Curator, a Negro who says he plays "a minor vocative part" in the drama Art, is the axis around which these subjects revolve.

Tolson approaches the subjects through dramatization and discursiveness. Not the least of his accomplishments in Harlem Gallery is the creation of several memorable characters; Doctor Nkomo, Bantu expatriate and Africanist; Hideho Heights, beatnik bard of Lenox Avenue; Mr. Guy Delaporte III, "black bourgeois" president of Bola Boa Enterprises; Black Orchid, his blues-singing striptease mistress; John Laugart, half-blind Harlem artist murder victim; Black Diamond

heir-presumptive of the Lenox policy racket in the ghetto; and the Curator, intellectual ex-professor of Art, who introduces the reader to the highbrows and middlebrows and lowbrows wandering through the Harlem Gallery, that he may know, as Tolson said, more about the "souls of black folk."

Various critics have called attention to the success of Tolson's characterizations. Virginia Scott Miner predicts that these characters will likely "become part of the language."³ A reviewer for Australia's Poetry magazine considers the best quality of the work the "humour with which these strange but simple people make their entrances and exits as incidents in Tolson's mind."⁴ Laurence Lieberman says the characters are "literary oddities" which "sparkle like ornaments in the vast mosaic of the book."⁵ Tolson was particularly pleased by the comment of Robert Donald Spector in Saturday Review that there is a "Somethingness" that stirs in all the characters: "desires, ambitions, frustrations, and failures" which serve as a refutation of Gertrude Stein's charge that the Negro "suffers from Nothingness."⁶

The present Harlem Gallery evolved from a series of character sketches entitled "A Gallery of Harlem Portraits," which Tolson composed in the 1930's. In an interview in 1965 he described the conception of his latest book:

Tolson: In 1930 I was a student, on a Rockefeller Fellowship, at Columbia University. I met there a dreamer

from the University of Iowa, who was trying to put together a Proustian novel One day I showed my young white friend a sonnet that I had written. It was titled "Harlem!" He read it two or three times, and then said fretfully, "Melvin, Harlem is too big for a sonnet." That was the genesis of the Harlem Gallery.

Interviewer: But that was in 1930--thirty-five years ago.

Tolson: I know it seems like an age. The first finished manuscript of the Harlem Gallery was written in free verse. That was the fashion introduced by the Imagists. It contained 340 pages. The Spoon River Anthology of Edgar Lee Masters was my model. Browning's psychology in characterization stimulated me. I had deserted the great Romantics and Victorians. Walt Whitman's exuberance was in the marrow of my bones. I peddled the manuscript in the New York market. Nobody wanted it. The publishers and critics said for commercial reasons. A few of the poems appeared in V. F. Calverton's Modern Quarterly. Then I stashed the manuscript in my trunk for twenty years. At the end

of that time I had read and absorbed the techniques of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Baudelaire, Pasternak and, I believe, all the great Moderns. God only knows how many "little magazines" I studied, and how much textual analysis of the New Critics. To make a long story short, the new Harlem Gallery was completed, and now it is published.⁷

The last few lines of this interview describe the difficult school through which Tolson put himself. He "read and absorbed the techniques of . . . the great Moderns." He studied hundreds of "little magazines." He concentrated on the "textual analysis of the New Critics." How long does it take to teach oneself the technique of an Ezra Pound, a T. S. Eliot, a Hart Crane? Tolson was a talented individual intent on making himself into one of the better poets of his time. To develop the technique he sought required several decades.

What took so long? Why were many other writers able to develop much more quickly? He shared with some of them the burden of having to work fulltime at another job in order to support and educate his family. But the literary vacuum in which he lived was of even greater significance in hampering his development.

The last forty-five years of his life--with the exception of brief periods during the thirties when he attended Columbia University in New York--were spent in two small, quite isolated Negro colleges, one in South Texas and one in central Oklahoma. Langston, Oklahoma,

where he wrote Libretto for the Republic of Liberia and Harlem Gallery, is a small Negro village of some three hundred people. Other than Coyle, a small town slightly larger than Langston, the nearest town, Guthrie, is twelve miles away. The closest cultural center, Oklahoma City, is approximately a fifty-mile trip, and since Tolson had difficulty driving in city traffic, he had to depend on someone to drive him or else make trips there by bus or train. As for the contact with other writers, which he needed desperately, he could point only to brief encounters with literary figures. The assistance and interchange of ideas and criticism would have given him can be estimated by studying the effect the major writers of any period have had on one another, for instance the great Moderns whom Tolson was attempting to emulate.

Richard Ellmann's recent study of interaction among writers at the turn of the century and the years following, Eminent Domain (1967), demonstrates forcefully the importance of such a working relationship to artists. He writes of how Yeats first met Oscar Wilde at the home of William Ernest Henley. Wilde invited Yeats to dinner on Christmas Day, 1888, and read to him the proofs of his essay "The Decay of Lying." The effect was "immediate and lasting," for Wilde provided the esthetic Yeats had been attempting to formulate concerning the nature and function of Art.⁸ During the middle nineties Yeats shared lodgings with Arthur Symons, who championed decadence for a time. He argued with Symons that symbolism, not

decadence, was the trunk of modern literature. After he wrote three essays on symbolism for Symons' magazine, The Savoy, Symons published a book on The Symbolist Movement in Literature instead of on the decadent movement as he had planned, and he dedicated it to Yeats.⁹

The effect which Yeats and the younger Joyce exerted on each other can hardly be exaggerated. Joyce turned from verse to prose primarily because of Yeats's acknowledged domination in poetry. Throughout their lives, they criticized each other's work but also served as advocates for each other.

Ezra Pound met Yeats in 1908, six years before he met Eliot. Yeats was impressed with Pound's book Personae, which appeared in 1919. Eliot "battled Yeats for Pound's soul"¹⁰ When Pound persuaded Yeats to send some poems by him to Poetry magazine, he had the audacity to change the wording in several lines. Mightily offended at first, Yeats later asked Pound to criticize his work. At the age of sixty-nine Yeats sent Pound a new play, The King of the Great Clock Tower. Pound called it "putrid" and said the lyrics were in "nobody language," which would not do for drama. Willing to "undergo any indignity for the work's sake," Yeats set about to remedy the "nobody language." Pound's knowledge of the power he had over Yeats undoubtedly reinforced Pound's sense of his own independent talent.¹¹

Is it no wonder that Tolson, struggling alone to master the

modern styles and techniques, would write,

Does a Yeats or a beast or a Wovoka

see and hear

when our own faculties fail?¹²

The style which marks both Libretto and Harlem Gallery is based on his "3-S Trinity" and his knowledge of grammar, which determines the line length and the stanzaic formation. Climax is the ladder of interest which moves the reader through the long ode, composed of twenty-four divisions named for the Greek alphabet. One critic points out Tolson's technical virtuosity in keeping the eye moving down the page by centering long and short lines on a vertical axis, which gives the poem "a forward-thrust of great energy and momentum," commanding the reader to keep on to the finish.¹³

Tolson wrote and polished the poem for some ten years. When he began, he had a general plan in mind, but only as he moved along did the characters and episodes begin to emerge. He never feared the lengthy, formidable task he had laid out for himself, for he felt he was well prepared. He was steeped in tradition; he had a thorough knowledge of grammar, the backbone of his style; and he had his formula of sight, sound, and sense. For years he had been a teacher of men and a student of man. Such an environment would surely prove dry tinder for the spark of artistic imagination smoldering inside. He has the Curator say of himself,

. . . within the flame is a core
of gas as yet unburnt
and undetected like an uninflected spoor.

(p. 25)

The plaudits of Karl Shapiro's pre-publication review, published later as the Introduction to Harlem Gallery, turned the attention of much of the literary world to his work. Prophesying that the work might well be "the door to poetry that everyone has been looking for," Shapiro said it is "a narrative work so fantastically stylized that the mind balks at comparisons." Of the content, he wrote,

The milieu is Harlem from the Twenties on. The dramatis personae comprise every symbolic character, from the black bourgeois babbitt and the Lenox Avenue poet to the alienated Negro Professor and sage who sits in the bar and elaborates, along with The Curator and others, a Platonic dialogue. The give-and-take ostensibly moves on a level of talk about the arts-- a "floor" which is constantly caving in and plunging the reader into the depth of metaphysical horror which journalists nowadays refer to as the Race Question.¹⁴

Book I of the planned five-volume epic of the Negro in America is named for its protagonist, the Curator. Tolson said of him,
The Curator is of Afroirishjewish ancestry. He is an octoroon, who is a Negro in New York and a white

man in Mississippi. Like Walter White, the late executive of the N. A. A. C. P., and the author of A Man Called White, the Curator is a "voluntary" Negro. Hundreds of thousands of octoroons like him have vanished into the Caucasian race--never to return. This is a great joke among Negroes. So Negroes ask the rhetorical question, "What white man is white?" We never know the real name of the Curator. The Curator is both physiologically and psychologically "The Invisible Man." He, as well as his darker brothers, think in Negro. Book One is his autobiography. He is a cosmopolite, a humanist, a connoisseur of the fine arts, with catholicity of taste and interest. He knows intimately lowbrows and middlebrows and high-brows. 15

"Alpha" establishes the relationship of the Curator to the Harlem Gallery, to his work, his age, his people, and himself. The opening and closing lines of "Alpha" introduce the themes to be pursued throughout the poem: the situation of the black American and the role of the artist--particularly the Negro artist:

The Harlem Gallery, an Afric pepper bird,
 awakes me at a people's dusk of dawn.
 The age altars its image, a dog's hind leg,
 and hazards the moment of truth in pawn.

. . . .

Although the gaffing "Tò tí?" of the Gadfly girds

the I-ness of my humanness and Negroness,

the clockbird's

jackass laughter

in sun, in rain,

at dusk of dawn,

mixes with the pepper bird's reveille in my brain,

where the plain in twilled and the twilled is plain.

(pp. 19, 20)

The author explained the three phrases here which "bear a weighty theme as metaphors." The Afric pepper bird is the alarm clock on the west coast of Africa, the continent from which some of the Curator's ancestors came. "A people's dusk of dawn" is an allusion to the title of a book, Dusk of Dawn, by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, a founder of the N. A. A. C. P. and of the Pan-African Congress in Paris, a person whom Tolson admired greatly. For the black man, the sun will also rise--in time. The Curator, a man of fine sensibility, hears the "jackass laughter" of the clockbird, an Australian bird, which, unlike the pepper bird, laughs at both dusk and dawn. "The metaphor and symbol represents the scorn of Negrophobes."¹⁶

The age, though still tainted with racial injustice, congratulates itself on its liberal attitude. To the Curator, it is "a dog's hind leg."

The poet changes the noun altar to a verb, making a pun of the alliterative word. He supports his characterization of the age in the first stanza with juxtaposed allusions from literature, art, and history. Laden with connotation, they summon up gory, strife-torn scenes of revolution:

The Lord of the House of Flies,
jaundice-eyed, synapses purled,
wries before the tumultuous canvas,

The Second of May--

by Goya:

the dagger of Madrid

vs.

the scimitar of Murat.

(p. 19)

These lines illustrate the influence of sight, sound, and sense. The poet's knowledge of grammar and sentence structure determine the length of the line. The first line contains the subject of the sentence, which is suggestive of the devil or Beelzebub,¹⁷ and also carries with it the nightmarish connotation of Golding's novel Lord of the Flies (1954). Parallel compound adjectives constitute line two. Line three contains the predicate. Line four names Goya's painting and is an appositive to the last word in the preceding line. Line five is a brief prepositional phrase identifying the painter. Lines six and eight are parallel in construction: nouns preceded by the and followed by the preposition of and the proper nouns serving as objects. Line seven

is the single word vs., which separates and balances lines six and eight. Throughout the poem the lines divide consistently according to grammatical logic, assisting in interpretation. The initial section concludes with further commentary on the Great White World, which labors, yet cannot deliver, that decision which will hasten the dawn.

In Africa, in Asia, on the Day
of Barricades, alarm birds bedevil the Great White World,
a Buridan's ass--not Balaam's--between no oats and hay.

(p. 19)

The Curator pictures himself as an occasionally-absurd, often-abused figure. As he travels through "man's Saharic up-and-down," sometimes a "Roscius as tragedian," sometimes a "Kean as clown," occasionally he musters a "rich Indies' cargo." More often, however, he hears

. . . a dry husk-of-locust blues
descend the tone ladder of a laughing goose,
syncopating between
the faggot and the noose:
"Black Boy, O Black Boy,
is the port worth the cruise?"

(p. 20)

Though the Curator's spirit sometimes "wears away" in the "dustbowl of abuse," the sense of values and inner strength which shield him against the clockbird's "jackass laughter" surface often in the sections

which follow.

In the next four books - "Beta, " "Gamma, " "Delta, " and "Epsilon" - the Curator muses about man, art, the artist, and his own specific role as a twentieth-century Afro-American artist. "Beta" opens with the philosophical speculation

O Tempora

what is man?

(Pull down the ladder of sophistry!)

O Mores,

what manner of man is this?

(Guy the ologists in effigy!)

(p. 21)

He answers his question by saying that no one knows "the archimedean pit and pith of a man. " Even to explore it

one needs the clarity

the comma gives the eye,

not the head of the hawk

swollen with rye.

(p. 21)

These lines demonstrate the poet's method of interspersing lines of meter with rhythmical but unmetrical lines. Always, sight, sound, and sense and grammatical logic dictate the length of line. The parallelism of the first three lines and the second three lines in the "O Tempora" passage establishes the relationship of the questions

and sets up the discussion which leads to the Curator's self-analysis. In the four-line excerpt, the alliterative c's (clarity, comma) and h's (head, hawk) and the predominantly iambic trimeter lines with ABCB rhyme scheme make for unity and smoothness of expression. These lines are among the many quotable lines which appear throughout the poem. Such phrases as "the clarity the comma gives the eye" and "the head of the hawk/ swollen with rye" appeal to the senses.

The Curator's thoughts then drift from generalizations about man to the "minor vocative part" he has played in Art. Though he speaks knowledgably of the agony of the artist in later sections, his tone here is light:

"Great minds require of us a reading glass;

great souls, a hearing aid."

But I

in the shuttlebox world,

again and again,

have both mislaid.

(p. 22)

The Curator is an ex-professor of Art, his identity "gored" by routine. Like his creator, he feels that the upper rungs of his ladder are "zeroes." Each has observed with interest the angry young artists of succeeding generations--The Lost, The Bright, The Angry, The Beat. They, too, have worked to reshape the thoughts and dreams of each

decade, refusing to "stoop the neck to die/ like a dunghill cock"
(p. 25).

"Gamma" equates Art with a "babel city in the people's Shinar"
where "sweating pilgrims" jostle about and apostates dodge apostles'
arrows. The Curator takes hope, however, as he recalls his
Afroirishjewish grandfather's faith in man's ability to survive, though

"Between the dead sea Hitherto
and the promised land Hence
looms the wilderness Now"

(p. 27)

These lines illustrate the epigrammatic quality which appears frequently in the poem. Often the metaphor teams with parallelism, and sometimes personification, to produce brief lines of wit.

"Delta" advances the choice of the artist: God or Caesar. There is no point in probing the artist's motive, the Curator says, whether the work is "for Ars', / the Cathedra's, or the Agora's sake" (p. 29). Only the result is important. The artist must have courage, for he endures his pain alone--a "St. John's agony. . . with a St. John's fire--" (p. 31). Though one man is willed "the wings of an eagle" and another "the teats of a sow," no man should sneer at his fellow man. Neither should he envy him: "Let thy blue eyes resist white stars of red desire" (p. 32). Equally colorful is the simile which pictures Art as being "unique as the white tiger's/ pink paws and blue eyes. . ." (p. 33).

"Epsilon" introduces the pressures brought to bear upon the artist by "the idols of the tribe," who demand that he celebrate their heroes. The Curator recalls that "Milton's Lucifer was a Cavalier--/ his God, a Roundhead" (p. 34). The artist's heroes are not necessarily those of the "bulls of Bashan," who exert power, serving

. . . Belshazzarian tables to artists and poets who

serve the hour,

torn between two masters,

God and Caesar--

this (for Conscience),

the Chomolungma of disasters.

(p. 36)

To understand the full implications of the Curator's references to "the Idols of the Tribe" and the "bulls of Bashan" requires a knowledge not only of English literature and the Bible, but of the sociological work Black Bourgeoisie (1957), written by a Howard University professor whom Tolson admired, E. Franklin Frazier. Black bourgeoisie is the term Frazier uses to describe those members of the Negro middle class who have separated themselves from their folk background and have "accepted unconditionally the values of the white bourgeois world: its morals and its canons of respectability, its standards of beauty and consumption." ¹⁸ Frazier says that because the white world has continued to reject the black bourgeoisie, they have developed a deep-seated inferiority complex. To compensate

they have created a world of make-believe to "escape the disdain of whites and fulfill their wish for status in American life."¹⁹ The tendency to glamorize social life makes "socialites" of Negroes considered newsworthy. "The exaggerated importance which the black bourgeoisie attaches to 'society' is revealed in the emphasis placed by the Negro press upon the social aspects of events concerning Negroes."²⁰ Thus, "Epsilon" opens with "the idols of the tribe" bellowing, "We/ have heroes! Celebrate them upon our walls!" (p. 34). Tolson regarded such "Cadillac Philistines" (p. 57) with amusement and pity. Truth, he believed, demanded that he celebrate the lowbrows of Afro-America as well as the middlebrows and highbrows, and he felt that the black bourgeoisie would be wondering, "What will the white folks think?"

Tolson's decision not to give the Curator a name, according to his notes on Harlem Gallery, was done with the ironic awareness that among the black bourgeoisie, such a title would be deserving of great respect. He wrote,

Degrees and titles have fabulous status value. Nobody wants to be a nobody; everybody wants to be Somebody! So a title makes the possessor and the Race Somebody in the Great White World. Professor, Doctor, the Honorable, Reverend, Grand Basileus, President, Grand Polemarch, Judge, etc. So white folk can't call these "Boy" and "Uncle." Degrees and titles in

the Negro world have individual and ethnic survival value. When a Negro achieves in the Arts or Sports, his Great I Am runs through the Race like electricity along a wire. If he messes up, the same thing occurs. So Negroes who never go to the Harlem Gallery get a kick out of the title The Curator. It's a new title and shows that the Race is going places.²¹

The Curator, along with his intellectual friends John Laugart and Doctor Nkomo, elaborates on the black bourgeoisie in later sections. Tolson was aware that the intrusion of the Frazier terminology and philosophy into the poem would not make for popularity among those readers who disagree with the theses Frazier propounds in Black Bourgeoisie. Some of his assertions about a segment of the black population in the United States would be considered not explanatory, but derogatory. He anticipated this reaction. Sensitive to the Negro artist's problem of satisfying both a black and white audience, he stated that if the white artist is alienated in this country, the Negro artist is annihilated. He desired recognition--even popularity--from his own race. But he would not compromise with what he believed to be the truth about either black or white Americans.

Sicilian Bull and Sicilian Vespers

non obstante,

Art's

yen to beard in the den

deep down under root and stone
 fossick gold and fossick ivory
 stands out
 like a whale's
 backbone.
 (p. 36)

"Epsilon" defines some of the temptations and pressures the artist suffers. In "Zeta" the Curator visits the catacomb Harlem flat of his half-blind painter friend John Laugart, who, though he starve, will "never sell/mohair for alpaca/ to ring the bell!" (p. 41). He sees Laugart's painting, Black Bourgeoisie (Tolson's notes indicate that the painting was inspired by Frazier's book Black Bourgeoisie), and thinks to himself that it will evoke a "Jeremian cry" from the "babbitted souls" of the eyeless Regents of Harlem Gallery. Laugart reads his thoughts and assures him,

"A work of art
 is an everlasting flower
 in kind or unkind hands;
 dried out,
 it does not lose its form and color
 in native or in alien lands."

(p. 39)

Laugart's philosophical comments make him one of the memorable characters in Harlem Gallery, though he appears but briefly,

then is robbed and murdered in his flat, with only a "Hamletian rat" for witness. His sense of values is underscored clearly as he tells the Curator,

"It matters not a tinker's dam
on the hither or thither side of the Acheron
how many rivers you cross
if you fail to cross the Rubicon!"

(p. 42)

Though John Laugart's work brought him only "a bottle of Schiedam gin/ and Charon's grin/ and infamy" (p. 42), his courage is the stuff the true artist is made of, the Curator implies.

In "Eta" the Curator goes to Aunt Grindle's Elite Chitterling Shop, where he encounters "the alter ego/ of the Harlem Gallery," Doctor Obi Nkomo, who reaffirms Picasso's statement, "The lie of the artist is the only lie/ for which a mortal or a god should die." (p. 43). To the African, "Nobody was a nobody," and though irony occasionally escapes his lips, no malice is intended. He calls the hand of his Americanized brethren because of the dichotomy he sees between their theory and practice of democracy and Christianity.

When a dope-sniffing "giraffine fellow" asks curiously, "Mister, who are you?" Doctor Nkomo replies with a Zulu story which scarcely enlightens the "Ixion bound/ to the everlasting revolving ghetto wheel" (p. 50). A hunter once found an eagle in a chicken-yard. He took it to a mountaintop and threw it into space.

It tumbled down, "a ghostified cock," when suddenly another eagle swooped out of the sky, "clarioning the summons of an aered race."

The barnyard eagle answer twice, then

"thrice

he spiraled the simoom-blistered height--

braked and banked and beaked

upward, upward, into transfiguring light.

Old Probabilities, what am I?

Mister, what are you?

An eagle or a chicken come home to roost?

I wish I knew!"

Here, as throughout the poem, the grammatical structure determines the length of the line. A natural pause comes at the end of each line, even when punctuation is not needed. The word thrice is emphasized as it stands alone. Line two contains the independent clause in the sentence. The next line consists of three parallel, alliterative verbs connected with the coordinate conjunction and followed by a slight pause which gives impetus to the two upwards at the beginning of line four. Each of the last four lines is a sentence, a logical break occurring at the end of the lines. The sound of the alliterative and onomatopoeic "spiraled, simoom" and "blistered, banked, braked, beaked" exhibit the artistry of the poet guided by his "3-S" formula. The contrast between the eagle which "thrice. . . spiraled the simoom-blistered height" and the commonplace wording of the final

question-- Are you "an eagle or a chicken come home to roost?"-- intensifies the comic effect. It parallels the intellectual level of the "yellow giraffine fellow" who asks the philosophical Africanist, "Mister, who are you?" and the esoteric Doctor Nkomo whose answer is lost on him.

When Doctor Nkomo loses his temper momentarily with Mr. Guy Delaporte III, shogun of Bola Boa Enterprises, Inc., and prime example of Frazier's black bourgeoisie, the Africanist apologizes with sincerity:

"I've called the gentleman a liar

--it's true--

and I am sorry for it."

(p. 52)

The wit of Doctor Nkomo and the poet's mastery of the three S's with emphasis on alliteration, onomatopoeia, parallelism, and imagery intensify the effectiveness of the lines.

The brief "Theta" section emphasizes the unifying power of art. The poet juxtaposes phrases from Frost and Blake in this passage:

"Something there is in Art that does not love a wall.

Idea and image,

form and content,

blend like pigment with pigment

in a flesh color.

What dread hand can unmix

pink and yellow? "

(p. 54)

Art, he says, unites Montague's son and Capulet's daughter as "the miracle of the metaphor smites/ disparate realms into a form/ tighter than a mailed fist" (p. 55). Both Art and Nature explore the whole as they "ignore/ the outer and the inner/ of a person/ a place, a thing. . . ." (p. 55).

"Iota" opens with the Curator and Doctor Nkomo welcoming the "gobbler-breasted matrons" and their spouses to the Harlem Gallery. As the Curator looks through the four wings of the gallery, he sees portraits of Negroid diversity--of "Kafiristan gaucherie" and "Attic wit and nerve." The gallery is "Harlem's Aganippe/ (not America's itching aitchbone)!" (p. 60).

The "idols of the tribe" once more demand that their heroes be celebrated. Doctor Nkomo chuckles, for his hobby is tracing family lines. What has he discovered about even the "best" of families?

"If

a Bourbon should shake his family tree

long enough. . . he

--beyond a Diogenic doubt--

would kneel at the mourner's bench,

dressed in black crepe,

as cannibal and idiot,

rapist and ape,

tumble out. "

(p. 62)

Just as the Bourbons are made up of cannibals and kings, so the Curator sees among the visitors to the gallery both "gentlemen and galoots. "

In "Kappa, " Mr. and Mrs. Guy Delaporte III make an appearance as they "oh and yawn and ah" their way through Harlem's Vanity Fair,

he,

with a frown like curd;

she,

with a smile like whey.

(p. 64)

The successful president of Bola Boa Enterprises, Inc., is the symbol of Churchianity at Mount Zion, where the Sugar Hill elite worship. He is unhappy because no "brand-new \$-world in Harlem gives him pause" and because he cannot master his wife, with her "incurves and outcurves of breasts and hips, " whom Bishop Euphorbus Harmsworth attempts to shield from his anger. When Mr. Delaporte spies Laugart's painting Black Bourgeoisie, he is "a wounded Cape buffalo defying everything and Everyman!" (p. 65).

Nearby, the Curator and Doctor Nkomo observe his reaction. Nkomo remarks approvingly that the "mirage of the Status Quo, "

undisturbed, "chokes the vitals." The Curator agrees that it is time to "give voice to a bill/ of faith at another hour" (p. 67). Despite pressure and atrocities, the elan of the artist survives.

The next four books--"Lamba," "Mu," "Nu," and "Xi"--belong to the "vagabond bard of Lenox Avenue," Hideho Heights, one of the most colorful characters frequenting the Harlem Gallery. He announces his arrival with a voice like "a ferry horn in a river of fog":

"Hey, man, when you gonna close this dump?

Fetch highbrow stuff for the middlebrows who

don't give a damn and the lowbrows who ain't hip!"

(p. 68)

His excuse for being late exemplifies the wit characteristic of much of the dialogue:

"Sorry, Curator, I got here late:

my black ma birthed me in the Whites' bottom drawer,

and the Reds forgot to fish me out!"

(p. 68)

Fresh from a jam session at the Daddy-O Club, Hideho folds his lips about the neck of a bottle of "white-heat hooch" and begins to chant his most recent inspiration, a tribute to Louis Armstrong:

King Oliver of New Orleans

has kicked the bucket, but he left behind

old Satchmo with his red-hot horn
to syncopate the heart and mind.

The honky-tonks in Storyville
have turned to ashes, have turned to dust,
but old Satchmo is still around
like Uncle Sam's IN GOD WE TRUST ...

Where, oh, where is Bessie Smith
with her heart as big as the blues of truth?

Where, oh, where is Mister Jelly Roll
with his Cadillac and diamond tooth?

Where, oh, where is Papa Handy
with his blue notes a-dragging from bar to bar?

Where, oh, where is bulletproof Leadbelly
with his tall tales and 12-string guitar?

Old Hip Cats,

when you sang and played the blues
the night Satchmo was born,
did you know hypodermic needles in Rome
couldn't hoodoo him away from his horn?
Wyatt Earp's legend, John Henry's, too,
is a dare and a bet to old Satchmo
when his groovy blues put headlines in the news
from the Gold Coast to cold Moscow.

Old Satchmo'sgravelly voice and tapping foot and crazy notesset my soul on fire.If I climbedthe seventy-seven steps of the SeventhHeaven, Satchmo's high C would carry me higher!Are you hip to this, Harlem? Are you hip?On Judgment Day, Gabriel will sayafter he blows his horn:"I'd be the greatest trumpeter in the Universe,if old Satchmo had never been born!"

(pp. 69-70)

The ballad builds from a relatively regular iambic tetrameter line in the first two eight-line sections to a freer metrical and rhyme pattern in the last two sections. Why does the part vary the rhythm and rhyme scheme as the poem moves along? The "song" builds to a climax in the fourth part, and the "singer" requires freedom to express the emotion which cannot be contained within the confines of a regular pattern. The ballad begins with the statement that "old Satchmo is still around," expressed in comparatively regular meter and rhyme scheme, to the intensity of

Old Satchmo'sgravelly voice and tapping foot and crazy notesset my soul on fire.

(p.. 70)

The emotion builds with Hideho's theoretical climb up the "seventy-seven steps of the Seventh/ Heaven"--the poet depending heavily on alliteration here rather than metrical pattern--where "Satchmo's high C would carry me higher." The seriocomic treatment of Satchmo began with King Oliver "kicking the bucket." It climaxed with the Judgment Day image of Gabriel, who blows his horn, then admits, "I'd be the greatest trumpeter in the Universe/ if old Satchmo had never been born!"

Hideho has set the mood, and in "Mu" the Zulu Club "black cats, are gone!" (p. 74). A vixen wearing a tight Park Avenue skirt does the Lenox Avenue Quake. The Curator says, "She's a willow. . . by a cesspool," and Hideho muses, "Do I hear the Curator rattle Eliotic bones?" (p. 72). Snakehips Briskie performs against a background of "rich and complex polyrhythms."

Snakehips' body and soul

began to twist and untwist like a gyrating rawhide--

began to coil, to writhe

like a prismatic-hued python

in the throes of copulation.

(p. 73)

Amid the stamping feet and clapping hands, the Curator recalls the assertion of Gertrude Stein that "The Negro suffers from Nothingness." Hideho says, "Jazz is the marijuana of the Blacks." The Curator replies, "Jazz is the philosophers' egg of the Whites (p. 74).

Hideho juxtaposes a Shakespearean image into the caricature of his host:

"Yonder Curator has a lean and hungry look;
he thinks too much.

Such blackamoors are dangerous to
the Great White World!"

(p. 76)

In "Nu" the M. C., Rufino Laughlin, introduces Hideho as the guest poet for the evening. A "tipsy Lena" peddling "Edenic joys" proposes,

"If you make me a poem,

Hideho,

I'll make you my one and only daddy-o

till the Statue of Liberty

dates

a kinkyhead."

(p. 78)

"Xi" contains Hideho's epic "John Henry," the hero of which Tolson referred to as the Beowulf of the Afro-American. As the crowd awaits his performance,

Sudden silence,

succulent as the leaves of a fat hen, swallowed

up the Zulu Club.

(p. 79)

The image of the yellow folds of internal fat which flavor the hen, combined with the alliterative words sudden, silence, succulent, and swallowed appeal to the senses of taste and hearing. These and the attention to line division--the pause after silence and the balanced words swallowed and succulent which begin and end the second line demonstrate the "3-S" formula. The allure of colorful words is also evident in these lines describing Hideho's stance:

He staged a brown pose that minded me
 of an atheistic black baritone
 who sang blue spirituals that turned
 some white folk white, some pink, and others red.

(p. 79)

Such lines seem to satisfy the poet's compulsion to play with words and images,

Hideho begins the account of John Henry in a "faraway funereal voice." His audience interrupts and accompanies him.

"The night John Henry was born
 no Wise Men came to his cabin because
 they got lost in a raging storm
 that tore
 the countryside apart
 like a mother's womb
 when a too-big son is born."

(p. 80)

Dipsy Muse cries, "Great God A'Mighty" and squeezes his fat spouse.

Murmurs ebb and flow. Hideho continues,

The night John Henry is born an ax
of lightning splits the sky
and a hammer of thunder pounds the earth,
and the eagles and panthers cry!

(p. 81)

Wafer Waite, an ex-peon who has survived a Texas tornado, cries,

"Didn't John Henry's Ma and Pa get no warning?" Hideho replies,

"Brother, / the tornado alarm became tongue tied."

John Henry--he says to his Ma and Pa:

"Get a gallon of barley corn.

I want to start right, like a he-man child,

the night that I am born!"

(p. 81)

The audience whoops and stomps, "claps thighs, backs, and knees."

Says: "I want some ham hocks, ribs, and jowls

a pot of cabbage and greens;

some hoecakes, jam, and buttermilk,

a platter of pork and beans!"

John Henry's Ma--she wrings her hands,

and his Pa--he scratches his head.

John Henry--he curses in giraffe-tall words,

flops over, and kicks down the bed.

He's burning mad, like a bear on fire--

so he tears to the riverside.

As he stoops to drink, Old Man River gets scared

and runs upstream to hide!

Some say he was born in Georgia--O Lord!

Some say in Alabam.

But it's writ on the rock at the Big Bend Tunnel:

"Lousyana was my home. So scram!"

.

I was born in Bitchville, Lousyana.

A son of Ham, I had to scram!

I was born in Bitchville, Lousyana:

so I ain't worth a T. B. damn!

.

Ma taught me to pray. Pa taught me to grin,

It pays, Black Boy; oh, it pays!

So I pray to God and grin at the Whites

in seventy-seven different ways!

I came to Lenox Avenue.

Poor Boy Blue! Poor Boy Blue!

I came to Lenox Avenue

but I found up here a Bitchville, too! ²²

The Zulu Club Wits applaud while Hideho takes a swig that would "make/ a squirrel spit in the eye of a bulldog" (p. 82). Then

an ex-professor of philosophy, Joshua Nitze, entertains the Wits with an anecdote on integration. A black stevedore went into an elite restaurant in the South. The white waitress asked, "What can I do for you, Mister?" Nitze paused to ask if they can imagine "a black man mistered by a white dame/ in the Bible Belt of the pale phallus and chalk clitoris" (p. 85). When the dockhand orders chitterlings and the waitress says they are not on the menu, he sneers,

"Night and day, Ma'am,

I've been telling Black Folks

you White Folks ain't ready for integration!"

The Curator's sports editor friend, Vincent Aveline, tells him that a stool pigeon for Black Diamond has just informed him that his wife is having an affair with Mr. Guy Delaporte III. Black Diamond, "heir presumptive" of the Lenox Policy Rackets and ex-student of the Curator, is a good friend. He tells the Curator that if the Regents ever think of firing him, he will give the dossier he has on each of them to Walter Winchell. He would do it anyway were it not for race pride. "White Folks are always ready to disinfect the privy/ of decent Black Folks . . ." (p. 88). Besides, it sets a bad example for the little guys. Black Diamond makes sure that at his funeral the preacher will not "blab" and St. Peter will not "gab" by paying his church dues a year in advance.

Lionel Matheus then picks up the symbol of the white man as serpent, which Shadrach Martial Kilroy, president of Afroamerican

Freedom has introduced. Matheus says that the Afro-American is the frog which becomes more impaled on the fangs of the snake, the harder it pulls away. Doctor Nkomo reminds them that the big python swallows both the little python and the frog when the little python will not let go.

Kilroy tells Matheus that in order for his symbols to be successful, he needs to see

the unerring beak

the unnerving eye,

the untiring wing,

of Afroamerican Freedom, Incorporated--

the Republic's Secretary Bird.

(p. 91)

The influence that teaching English for over forty years had on Tolson's style is quite evident as these lines again demonstrate how grammatical logic determines the line.

Matheus says to Kilroy, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a nigger lover." Kilroy sighs, "It is hard for a phobic camel to go through the eye of a needle of truth" (p. 91). The Curator thinks how often metaphors and symbols have been the "Negro's manna in the Great White World." Hideho slumps, slobbers, and sobs,

"My people,

my people--

they know not what they do."

(p. 92)

Doctor Nkomo begins the "Omicron" section with the provocative statement that Life and Art "beget incestuously/ (like Osiris and Isis)/ the talented of brush and pen" (p. 93). This part contains many allusions to artists, historical figures, Biblical passages, and literature. It stresses again the pressures on the artist. The nine concluding sections elaborate on what constitute the artist's net loss, his net profit, his pride, his elan, his school, his grind, his temperament, his sensibility, his esthetic distance. In some of these sections the poet uses metaphors that define the artist clearly. He delineates the difficulties of becoming an artist in these lines:

The school of the artist
is
 the circle of wild horses,
 heads centered,
 as they present to the wolves
 a battery of heels. . . .

(p. 96)

At times the poet seems to be more intrigued with figures of speech and alliterative devices than with clarification. Such a metaphor describes the labor of the artist.

The grind of the artist
is
 the grind of the gravel in the gizzard
 of the golden eagle.
 (p. 97)

In other sections the "S-trinity" works well to produce effective images:

The esthetic distance of the artist
is
 the purple foxglove
 that excites
 the thermo receptors of the heart
 and the light receptors of the brain.

(p. 97)

In "Pi" the Curator thinks about art, the artist, and the critics. The end of art is not "I like," he begins. The artist must keep his integrity, no matter how strong the pressure becomes. The art work provides a bridge to paradise. Beyond this bridge stands the art lover. The artist must be courageous. He cannot be a "fence-sitter."

Nkomo notes that critics allow artists to go to "the holy of holies. . . or a whorehouse;/ but never to/ Harpers Ferry or Babaii Yar or Highgate" (p. 102). The Curator seeks the How, the What, and the Why when he looks at a work of art. He believes that the true artist is concerned not with the present so much as with the future: "The Harlot Now the master paints/ aspires to hang in the gallery Hence. . . ." (p. 102).

"Rho" resumes the Curator's character study. One New Year's Day he receives a rather incoherent call from Hedda Starks, alias Black Orchid, a "striptease has-been/ of the brassy pitband era"

(p. 103). While spending a night in jail after a marijuana party she is besieged with nightmares, and she wants to ease her conscience. She tells the Curator where he can find her deceased husband's manuscript, Harlem Vignettes, which she stole before his death.

The departed Mister Starks (named Mister by his mother to prevent his being called boy or uncle), had been captivated by Black Orchid's "barbarian bump and sophisticated grind" the first time he saw her. Her "exhumed liaison" with Mr. Guy Delaporte III broke his heart. He learned that "the descent to Avernus is easy" (p. 105), but he also discovered a fast ascent.

"Sigma" relates that Mister Starks had sent his last will and testament to the owner of the funeral home, Ma'am Shears. He requested that he be buried in the tails he had worn the night the Harlem Symphony Orchestra premiered his Black Orchid Suite. He asked that the ebony baton given to him by a West African witch-doctor be placed in his hand and that Black Orchid give the Curator the manuscript of his Harlem Vignettes which she had taken.

When Ma'am Shears received his will, she dialed his room. He answered and she begged him to be sensible, saying, "It's not like Black Folks to commit suicide" (p. 108). His remark "Aren't we civilized yet?" was lost on her, for she had never heard of Masaryk's statement in Vienna. He told Ma'am Shears to bring her assistant, Mr. Abelard Littlejohn, and that he would meet the two of them at "Archangel Gabriel's hangout/ on Elysian Boulevard" (p. 108).

"Sigma" ends on a cryptic note. The sergeant, who "knew his Conan Doyle from aardvark to zythum," found the bullet in Mister Stark's heart. The superintendent found the .38 in Crazy Cain's toilet bowl. At last the Curator has the Harlem Vignettes, and "The black ox treads the wine press of Harlem" (p. 110).

"Tau," the shortest book in the poem, introduces the longest book, "Upsilon," which contains the Harlem Vignettes. The manuscript is tied up in a mamba skin on which is inscribed in purple-red ink, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou make a work of art" (p. 111).

Years before Mister Starks had published a volume of imagistic verse. His reason for changing courses appears on the title page of the Vignettes:

I should have followed--perhaps--Des Imagistes

down the Macadam Road.

But I'm no Boabdil

at the Last Sigh of the Moor. "

(p. 111)

In "Upsilon" Mister Starks's series of character sketches may well bear some similarities to those appearing in Tolson's first Harlem Gallery. In the former work he was influenced both by Master's Spoon River Anthology and Browing's "psychology in characterization,"²³ but his style eclipses these influences in the present work. The first of Mister Starks's portraits is a self-portrait. Unlike Laugart and the Curator, he did not attempt to cross

the Rubicon. Instead, he tried to "poise the seesaw between want and have" (p. 112). His boogie-woogie record Pot Belly Papa sold a million copies, but the "sunrise on the summit" of his life was the premiere of the Black Orchid Suite by the Harlem Symphony Orchestra. The "fig leaf" of Black Orchid proved more powerful than the "Rosetta stone" and he rationalized,

So what the hell?

Am I not a Negro, a Harlemitte, an artist--

a trinity that stinks the ermine robes

of the class-conscious seraphs?

(p. 112)

Nevertheless, though he could sacrifice his artistic integrity for love, he admired the true artists he saw around him.

In the second portrait, for instance, he describes Hideho Heights as "a man square as the x in Dixie" (p. 113). Hideho's credo of art is "The form and content in a picture or a song/ should blend like the vowels in a diphthong" (p. 114). If an artist is sincere, the content of his work will be good. Mister Starks knew that the black bourgeoisie did not share his admiration of Hideho or his work. To them, he was "a crab louse/ in the pubic region of Afroamerica" (p. 114). Hideho was equally aware of their feeling, but it bothered him not at all.

The subjects of the third and fourth portraits are Dr. Igo Shears, deceased, and his wife Ma'am Shears, introduced in "Sigma" as

owner of the Angelus Funeral Home. Mister Starks pictures Dr. Shears as a man with two loves: the arts and fishing. Though they were friends, Dr. Shears was always an enigma to Mister Starks.

In contrast, Ma'am Shears's character

. . . was a cliché in the Book of Homilies;

and what she was was as legible

as a Spencerian address

in the window of an envelope.

(p. 115)

The character sketch of Crazy Cain helps explain the meaning of the statement in "Sigma" that the gun which had killed Mister Starks was found hidden in Crazy Cain's toilet bowl. Mister Starks says that he had fired Crazy Cain from the symphony orchestra because of his harsh "primitive percussive" style. A descendant of an Irish field hand and a Mandingo woman raped in an Alabama cottonfield, Crazy Cain knew nothing of his people's past but intuited somehow that he was the bastard son of Black Orchid, now Mister Stark's wife, and Mr. Guy Delaporte III. Mister Starks ends the sketch with the comment that "his knowing fell short of the Poudres de Succession" (p. 116). These facts make clear that there was likely little love between Crazy Cain and Mister Starks. When the reader considers Ma'am Shears' emphasis on the unnaturalness of a Negro's committing suicide, one possible interpretation is that Mister Starks, unable to pull the trigger himself, either provoked or persuaded Crazy Cain

to kill him. Another possibility is that this was his revenge against his wife and Delaporte.

Mister Starks devotes ten pages to the portraits of the two major characters in Harlem Gallery, Doctor Nkomo and the Curator. He recalls how his friend Dr. Shears had joshed Doctor Nkomo about his defense of socialism. The Africanist had laughed goodnaturedly and reminded his friend that even Whitman, though "bedded in the Democratic Vista Inn," had discovered that the materialism of the West was a "steatopygous Jezebel/ with falsies on her buttocks" (p. 118). Hideho Heights captures him with an "Aristotelian" metaphor:

"Obi Nkomo is a St. John who envisions
a brush turkey that makes
a mound of the Old World's decaying vegetables
to generate heat and hatch the eggs of the New."

(p. 118)

Mister Starks pictures the Harlem Gallery as a creek connecting the island and the mainland, an oasis in the desert. One of the "variegated aviary" that inhabit the gallery is the Curator, "a jacobin of horny, reversed epidermal outgrowths" (p. 119). He recalls how the Curator groaned when Guy Delaporte intoned, "I love-- God knows I love pictures!" (p. 119), for the Curator equated Delaporte the picture-lover with Ike the painter and Nikita the Art critic. Though the Harlem gossip-sheet, a black bourgeoisie publication,

aimed its volley at the Curator time and time again, he held his ground. Even Mr. Guy Delaporte begrudgingly said of the Curator that he was "a Greenland shark/ feeding on the carcass of a whale/ in spite of stabs in the head!" (p. 120). His friend Doctor Nkomo described him as a "dusky Francis I of France/ with an everlasting cartel of defiance" (p. 121).

That Mister Starks was a student of man appears in his discovery of the difference between Nkomo and the Curator, whose ideas and values were quite similar. During one of their pre-dawn discussions, they took up the subjects of race and caste. Nkomo believed that the lifting of the masses was the hope of mankind. He favored the integration of races. To him, the white man's theory of the cream separator was a "stinking skeleton," a dead theory in need of burial. The Curator, who liked to "dangle Socratic bait," suggested that perhaps "omniscience deigns to colorbreed" (p. 124).

At this, the janitor, an ex-chaplain from Alabama Christian College, joined them to add that according to the white man, African blood is so potent that only one drop makes an instant-Negro of the whitest Nordic. Perhaps, he suggested, there is hope for black man in the symbolism of the "rich opacity of cream/ and the poor whiteness of skim milk" (p. 125). Mister Starks commented (in parentheses) that he hoped mortals would never become mind readers, for a "sex image of a Mary of Magdala/ with kinky hair and a cream complexion" had just hula-hulaed across his mind.

The Curator then turned the cream and milk-metaphor from race to class. The safest course during a time of change is the middle road: "taste the milk of the skimmed/ and sip the cream of the skimmers" (p. 125). This attitude, to Nkomo, was an "eclipse of faith." A mind conscious of uprightness dares to "peddle/ the homogenized milk of multiculture" everywhere. This homogenized milk includes both the elite and the masses, as well as all races.

Mister Starks's psychoanalysis of Mrs. Guy Delaporte III explains why her husband, so successful in business enterprises and extramarital relationships, can neither understand nor control her uneven temperament. Mister Starks says she is victim of an Electra complex, is "a delicate plant exposed/ to the arctic circle of the black Sodom" (p. 127) Guy Delaporte, who causes her leaflets to close and her leafstalks to droop "in fits of relapsing fever" (p. 127). The poet's images here are reminiscent of the "chills and fever" image of John Crowe Ransom.

Mister Starks compares John Laugart, to whom "Zeta" was devoted, to the blind and paralytic French caricaturist Daumier: "each a bowl from the Potter's wheel/ the State buried in a potter's field. . ." (p. 127). His life was too hard for any man, but at last he rests in peace.

The final portrait in the Vignettes is that of Big Mama, mentioned briefly in "Rho" as the one to whom Black Orchid had given the Vignettes for safe keeping after stealing the manuscript. Big Mama's

conscience was for sale. She had street-sense, and many one hundred dollar bills had been planted in her "bediamonded claw." Her brag was,

"I was born in Rat Alley.

I live on Fox Avenue.

I shall die in Buzzard Street."

"Upsilon" closes with Mister Starks's reflecting on his failure to be the artist he might have been. Again he comforts himself with the thought that although self-pity is "conspicuous consumption of the soul," he knows, like "all 100-p. c. Negroes," that a white skin is the only way to success, freedom, justice, and equality. Occasionally he envisions a Rhapsody of Black and White, but he usually squelches the thought with a bottle of bootleg and reminds himself to "Put the notes on the staff, Black Boy!" (p. 132).

In "Phi" the Curator ponders the Harlem Vignettes. As he thinks of the cream-and-milk dialogue recorded by Mister Starks, he admits to himself that Nkomo is a better man than he. The conscience prick takes him back to the centuries-old suffering of his people in this poignant passage:

Beneath the sun

as he clutched the bars of a barracoon,

beneath the moon

of a blind and deaf-mute Sky,

my forebears head a Cameroon

chief, in the language of the King James Bible, cry,

"O Absalom, my son, my son!"

(p. 135)

The line division once more depends on grammatical logic in what is perhaps the most subjectively emotional passage in the poem. The poet demonstrates his ability to effect feeling by using alliterative words (beneath, bars, barracoon, beneath, blind, forebears, Bible); words containing long vowel sounds and assonance (barracoon, moon, Cameroon, etc.); a rhyme scheme (ABBCBCA) and strong iambic and anapestic lines of varied length; personification of the unseeing, unfeeling sky; and finally, pathos evoked by the allusion to King David mourning the loss of his beloved son.

He follows this subjective, metrical passage with unmetred lines which jerk the reader back to a safe distance from the highly emotional scene he has just witnessed. To secure objectivity and distance, the poet has Hideho Heights treat the Zulu Club Wits to his most recent inspiration, the story of an encounter between a sea turtle and a shark. The symbolic story relates how the shark swallows the turtle whole. Then when the turtle's descent is completed,

with ravenous jaws

that can cut sheet steel scrap,

the sea-turtle gnaws

and gnaws. . . and gnaws. . .

his way in a way that appalls--

his way to freedom,

beyond the vomiting dark,
 beyond the stomach walls
 of the shark.

(p. 141)

This passage reveals the power of interpretative line division and the influence of sound, sense, and sight. The repetition and rhyme of gnaws; the dissonance of the a sounds in the three gnaws and of the alliterative sheet steel scrap as well as the sharp blow effect of the six monosyllabic words in line two; the emphasis on way and beyond through repetition; the connotative imagery in all its factual horror; the word function and dramatic pause which determine the length of line--all explain the effectiveness of Hideho's story of the black sea turtle and the white shark.

Hideho concludes the section with a metaphoric description of the birth of an art-work. He compares the artist to a woman in labor, whose baby is the art-work. In the Kingdom of Poetry the travail may last for years, and there are many abortions as a result of quacks. The "Eddie Jests and Shortfellows" use no contraceptives as they copulate "with muses on the wrong side of the tracks." And many big-name poets abandon the little "hybrid bastards of their youth" (p. 144) without even bidding them farewell.

In "Chi" the Curator analyzes the "bifacial nature" of Hideho's poetry. He discovers that Hideho writes not only the "racial ballad in the public domain," but also "the private poem in the modern vein"

(p. 154)--like Tolson, interestingly enough. Hideho once admitted to the Curator the fear that he would be just another statistic when he died--unless his poetry lived on. The Curator understands Hideho's dilemma: "to be or not to be/ a Negro" (p. 146). When he takes Hideho home one night in a drunken stupor, he sees one of his modern poems, "E. & O. E." (the title of one of Tolson's earlier poems). In the poem the Curator reads Hideho's argument with himself:

"Why place an empty pail
before a well
of dry bones?

Why go to Nineveh to tell
the ailing that they ail?

Why lose a golden fleece
to gain a holy grail?"

(p. 147)

Hideho was the hero of the Negro masses. He ridiculed the artist or leader who did "Uncle Tom's asinine splits" (p. 148). Why should he give up his position as "Coeur de Lion" for what might well be an empty dream? The Curator's appetite was whetted as he read more of the poem so unlike the popular ballads the Harlem Gallery patrons applauded:

"Beneath
the albatross,
the skull-and-bones
the Skull and Cross,

the Seven Sins Dialectical,

I do not shake

the Wailing Wall

of Earth--

nor quake

the Gethsemane

of Sea--

nor tear

the Big Top

of Sky

with Lear's prayer

or Barabas's curse

or Job's cry!"

(p. 151)

In the penultimate section, "Psi," the Curator pulls together what he has set forth in this "autobio-fragment." Much has been left undone, he admits, but he has faced the Afro-American artist's "American dilemma." His controversial work pulses with Negro characters and philosophies unacceptable to a considerable segment of both the white and black reading public, and it is written in a difficult style, which limits his audience. To be a Negro artist here, now, is to be "a flower of the gods, whose growth/ is dwarfed at an early stage--" (p. 153). Yet, his artistic integrity is intact, and as Doctor Nkomo has said, "What is he" who has no self-respect?

(p. 153).

The Curator muses, "What is a Negro?" Nature at least has played fairly with the African. She has given him a "fleecy canopy" to protect his brain from the sun; a dark skin for work or play; an "accomodation nose" that cools the hot air; an "epidermis in broils" on which "lice-infested" hair will not grow.

"Black Boy" must realize that a grapevine from Bordeaux planted elsewhere will not produce Bordeaux wine. He must beware of believing every wine label that he reads. But he can be sure that "every people, by and by, produces its 'Chateau Bottled'" (p. 160).

"Who is a Negro?" The Curator, chameleon-like, passes for white in Norfolk, but is a Negro in New York. The White World may have an arctic attitude, but black and white must learn to work and live together:

you are the wick that absorbs the oil in my lamp,

in all kinds of weather;

and we are teeth in the pitch wheel²⁴

that work together.

(p. 161)

The Negro is "a dish in the white man's kitchen--/a potpourri," yet he is a dish nobody knows. The mixture of bloods resulting from "midnight-to-dawn lecheries, / in cabin and big house" have produced all shades of white and black and in-between.

The Curator concludes the section by prophesying an

intermixture of races which may eventually result in one race living
as brothers:

In a Vision in a Dream

from the frigid seaport of the proud Xanthochroid,

the good ship Défineznegro

sailed fine, under an unabridged moon,

to reach the archipelago

Nigeridentité.

In the Strait of Octoroon,

off black Scylla,

after the typhoon Phobos, out of the Sterotypus Sea

had rived her hull and sail to a T,

the Défineznegro sank the rock

and disappeared in the abyss

(Vanitas vanitatum!)

of white Charybdis.

(p. 164)

"Omega," the final book, addresses both "White Boy" and "Black Boy" as the Curator recapitulates his ideas about art, the artist, the Afro-American artist, and himself, putting them into perspective. He knows that even one caught in the trap of environment may luck upon "the know-how of a raccoon/ that gnaws off its leg to escape from a trap" (p. 165). Though the Curator has no Ph.D. from Harvard as some do, they may not have learned how to loosen

whatever "ball and chain" (p. 165) they drag around, as he has.

The artist must be strong, for his integrity is constantly tested. Will he stand on his head in the middle of Main Street to get coins from the vulgar? Will he paint/ an "ignus fatuus of nawiht" to win the approval of the elite? What if a "chef d'oeuvre is esoteric?" Can the apes of God not ape their Master?

Should he

skim the milk of culture for the elite

and give the "lesser breeds"

a popular latex brand?

Should he

(to increase digestibility)

break up

the fat globules and vitamins and casein shreds?

(p. 167)

It is the imagination which finally "steers the work of art aright" (p. 167). What the artist must have above all else is freedom, "the oxygen/ of the studio and gallery" (p. 169).

Harlem Gallery concludes on the personal, intimate tone with which it began when it awoke the Curator "at a people's dusk of dawn." What he has done here is to paint "dramatis personae in the dusk of dawn, / between America's epigraph and epitaph" (p. 171). At times, the "millstones of the Regents" have ground his spirit almost away, but he has kept at his long task of envisioning the Harlem Gallery of

his people, for he knows that "The present is only intelligible in the light of the past" (p. 171).

Now that it is completed, he expects to hear no "Selika's invisible choir" singing of the "Beyond's equalizing bar" (p. 172). If this work should be celebrated, the author would be unprepared for the deluge. Nor would he have the means whereby to defy the "dusky Regents," who

can knot the golden purse strings
while closeted in the Great Amen,
and mix the ingredients of Syncorax' brew!

(p. 173)

One final riddle--perhaps a warning or prophecy--he leaves with the reader: in the America of the 1960's although the white heather and white almond (symbols of life) grow in the black ghetto, the hyacinth and asphodel (symbols of death) blow in the white metropolis.

As for his Harlem Gallery, though the public may have an "arctic rigidity" in Art, the Curator hazards that his work is no "chippy fire,"

for here, in focus, are paintings that chronicle
a people's New World odyssey
from chattel to Esquire!

(p. 173)

When Karl Shapiro hailed Tolson as "one of the great architects

of modern poetry" and indicted the poetic establishment for ignoring him for years because he was a Negro, he invited a diversity of critical reaction. One reviewer wrote, "Mr. Shapiro's praise of Harlem Gallery is so high that it starts the reader off with an adverse reaction: 'Oh, look now. It can't be that good!'"²⁵

Lieberman quarrels with Shapiro's statement that "Tolson writes in Negro," claiming that many of his black students at St. Thomas come from diverse parts of the world and are both intelligent and interested in poetry, yet they do not understand Tolson. How, then, can Shapiro say he writes in Negro? Sarah Webster Fabio, black poet and critic, also claims that Shapiro's "identification of Tolson's language as being authentically 'Negro' is a gross inaccuracy" and names instead such black artists as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Phyllis Wheatley, Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, Ray Charles, Willie Mae Thornton, Langston Hughes, and LeRoi Jones, who, she says, come "to a lyric with a widely diverse body of diction and still, I think, speak 'Negro.'"²⁷ Whether or not Lieberman and Miss Fabio rightfully interpret Shapiro's statement can be further pursued by reading an article by Shapiro which appeared in the Wilson Library Bulletin, where he elaborates on his controversial contention about Tolson.²⁸ As Shapiro suspected, several critics also challenged his statement that the reason for the limited size of Tolson's audience is that he is a Negro.²⁹

Most critics comment on Tolson's style, about which they

usually have a strong feeling one way or the other, although some seem to quarrel with themselves. Lieberman says the book is "top-heavy" with tradition, special learning, and literary allusions and objects to passages "cluttered" with references to artists and their works. He admits, however that Harlem Gallery has "astonishing linguistic range, a vital new imagery, and much technical excitement."³⁰

An Australian reviewer says that Tolson writes "as an academic gone underground" and considers his "outpounding of Pound," which Shapiro pointed up, a flaw.³¹ David Littlejohn finds Harlem Gallery "clogged" with literary allusions, which he refers to as Tolson's "strange difficulties."³²

On the other hand, a London Times reviewer writes that although the work is difficult in the tradition of Pound, Eliot, and Hart Crane, "the artificially created idiom is itself the poem's theme: the nature of Negro art in a white culture"³³ Though most critics immediately place Tolson in the Eliot-Pound school, Tolson saw himself as more closely related to Hart Crane than either Pound or Eliot. In the light of a comment by David Daiches concerning the limitations of Eliot's influence--"There is, in fact, however much Mr. Eliot may repudiate personality in poetry, a highly idiosyncratic personality at work here whose solutions of common problems are not really helpful to others, for all the influence of his merely technical procedures on younger poets"³⁴ --one might wonder if

the conclusion that Eliot exerted an overabundant influence on Tolson might not result from a somewhat superficial reading. Robert Donald Spector, in an article which appeared in Saturday Review, sums up Tolson's last work: "But what of the fantastic way in which discussions of esthetics are turned into social comment? What of the incredible manner in which Tolson ranges over every field of art, plays adroitly with the language? These require pages of demonstration. Sufficient to say that whatever his reputation in the present critical climate, Tolson stands firmly as a great American poet."³⁵

The reviews indicate that Harlem Gallery is something of an enigma to a segment of its readers, but is acknowledged as a work to be reckoned with. It is, in the words of a British critic, a "strangely isolated work,"³⁶ and because of the unique subject matter-style combination, it is difficult to categorize. It is a work of art, a sociological commentary, an intellectual triple somersault. Jack Bickham, novelist and journalist, admits the impossibility of describing the book, then accepts his own challenge to attempt the impossible:

" . . . start with the brilliance and technical virtuosity of T. S. Eliot, add the earthy power of Whitman, toss in a dash of Frost, overlay with the Negro viewpoint from Louis Armstrong to Malcolm X to Martin Luther King, and perhaps you have a hint."³⁷

The critic of Harlem Gallery soon discovers that Bickham's initial statement is true: the only way to describe Harlem Gallery is to quote it.

NOTES

¹"Key Words," Tolson's unpublished notes, p. 3.

²p. 14.

³"A 'Great Poet' Unknown in Our Own Mid-West," The Kansas City Star, July 25, 1965.

⁴Anon. rev., June, 1966.

⁵"Poetry Chronicle," The Hudson Review (Autumn 1965), p. 457.

⁶"The Poet's Voice in the Crowd," August 7, 1965, p. 29.

⁷"Melvin B. Tolson: An Interview," Anger, and Beyond, ed.

Herbert Hill (New York, 1966), pp. 194-195. The interview was conducted by Mrs. Moxye W. King, at that time Chairman of the Department of English and Modern Languages, Langston University (March 10, 1965),

⁸New York, p. 15.

⁹Ibid., pp. 25-26.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 62.

- ¹¹ Ellmann, pp. 81-85. See also Time (November 22, 1968), pp. 96-98.
- ¹² "Xi, " Harlem Gallery, p. 79.
- ¹³ Laurence Lieberman, "Poetry Chronicle," p. 456.
- ¹⁴ Introduction, Harlem Gallery, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Cut B, manuscript of tape made for University of Wisconsin educational radio station March 10, 1965.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ "Lord of the flies" is a "translation of the Hebrew Ba'al-zevuv (Beelzebub in Greek). It has been suggested that it was a mistranslation of a mistransliterated word which gave us this pungent and suggestive name for the Devil, a devil whose name suggests that he is devoted to decay, destruction, demoralization, hysteria, and panic" See William Golding, "Notes," Lord of the Flies (New York, 1959), p. 190.
- ¹⁸ Glencoe, Illinois, p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 25.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 206.
- ²¹ "Key Words," p. 3.

²²"The Ballad of John Henry" appears in Dark Symphony, eds. James A. Emmanuel and Theodore L. Gross (New York, 1968), pp. 473-476.

²³"Melvin B. Tolson: An Interview," pp. 194-195.

²⁴Toothed wheel which rolls upon another toothed wheel.

²⁵Virginia Scott Miner, "A 'Great Poet' Unknown in Our Own Mid-West."

²⁶"Poetry Chronicle," p. 456.

²⁷"Who Speaks Negro?" Negro Digest, XVI, No. 2 (December 1966), p. 54.

²⁸"Decolonization of American Literature" (June 1965), p. 852.
See Appendix B for excerpt from article.

²⁹Josephine Jacobsen, "Books in Review," The (Baltimore, Md.) Evening Sun, November 2, 1965, p. A-20; Virginia Scott Miner, "A 'Great Poet' Unknown in Our Own Mid-West"; Robert Donald Spector, "The Poet's Voice in the Crowd."

³⁰"Poetry Chronicle," p. 457.

³¹James Tulip, "Afro-American Poet - M. B. Tolson," Poetry, Australia, No. 10 (June, 1966).

³²"Negro Writers Today: The Poets," Black On White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York, 1966), p. 82.

³³"A New Light on the Invisible," Literary Supplement, The London Times, November 25, 1965, p. 1049.

³⁴From Literary Essays (1956); reprinted in "Religion, Poetry, and the 'Dilemma' of the Modern Writer," Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Sheldon N. Grebstein (New York, 1968), p. 57.

³⁵"The Poet's Voice in the Crowd," p. 29.

³⁶"A New Light on the Invisible" (anon. rev.), p. 1049.

³⁷"Langston Poet May Signal New Era," The Sunday Oklahoman, May 23, 1965, p. 10.

CHAPTER V

TOLSON'S PLACE IN LITERATURE

The path of Tolson's development as a poet to be reckoned with was long and tedious, lined with wrong turns and detours. But why did the aspiring young writer whose ability was much in evidence when he was a student in high school and college produce only three volumes of poetry during his lifetime? Why was he fifty years old before he evolved a technique satisfactory to him? What were the major differences in his pattern of development and that of such major contemporary poets as William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost? Where did their paths diverge?

Yeats, at first, had rejected the Aesthetic Movement near the end of the nineteenth century. Then he became an important part of it, his style increasing in complexity, rooting itself in esoteric experience.¹ Oscar Wilde found elements of both "Athenian classicism" and "English romanticism" in Yeats's early work The Wanderings of Oisín (1889), which he criticized for its "strange crudities and irritating conceits," claiming the poet was "more fascinated by the beauty of words than by the beauty of metrical music."² C. K. Stead says that the Aesthetic period was not a waste for Yeats, however, for his "progress towards the goal of great poetry was

perhaps the most patient, tenacious and logical of any poet in our literature." ³

At the beginning of his career Yeats read Romantic literature and Irish poetry, finding much of his subject matter in the Irish resistance movement. Soon he began to struggle toward a position which included symbolists as well as occultists and patriots. He studied Blake's symbolic system, concluding in 1898 that the trunk of modern literature was symbolism. ⁴ Although in his maturity he returned to a position comparable with that of Blake in that his poems have a philosophical base, for Yeats the test of a poem was ever what it is rather than what it says, and he prevents a simple test of what his poems mean by assuming a series of dramatic masks. ⁵

By 1910 he began to feel he had broken away from the stylistic defects of his predecessors and he broadened the scope of his poetry. In the fall of 1911 he came to the United States with the Abbey Players, where he stressed the attempt of the new drama of Ireland to "catch the natural speech of ordinary people." ⁶ In 1913 he said that he tried to make his work convincing "with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of man thinking and feeling." The idea of poetry as dramatic speech leads to his greatest poems. ⁷ In the same year Yeats asked Pound for critical help, confiding to Lady Gregory in a letter that Pound "helps me to get back to the definite and concrete away from modern abstractions. To talk over a poem with him is like getting you to put a sentence in dialect. All

becomes clear and natural. "⁸ A letter from Pound to Harriet Monroe summarizes the principles he had communicated to Yeats. He called for "objectivity and again objectivity, and expression; no hind-side-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as "addled mosses dank"), no Tennysonianness of speech: nothing that you couldn't in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literary-ism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader's patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity. "⁹

At a Poetry dinner in Chicago in 1914, Yeats especially complimented Pound's "The Ballad of the Goodly Fere" and "The Return,"¹⁰ both of which exemplify the principles he had set forth in his letter to Miss Monroe. It is interesting that the New Poetry of the 1920's was to be profound and obscure, and that while Eliot was assuming the role of "poet's poet," Yeats was trying to return to something like the folk tradition.

Yeats had begun his career with the intention of creating a literature that would be "the possession of a people." He wanted to be widely read, to be thought of by the Irish as their national poet. He believed all good literatures were popular. This ideal reasserted itself strongly in the last years of his life.¹¹ He soon came to believe, however, that the Irish people were "not educated enough. . . to accept images more profound, more true to human nature, than the schoolboy thoughts of Young Ireland," and for twenty years he did not send his books to Irish reviewers because he did not trust them to

judge his work on its literary quality. He continued to speak to the world for Ireland, but he considered his accomplishment as a poet due not to his Irish readers, who wanted him to propagandize their cause, but in spite of them. He wanted an audience, but more than that he wanted to write good poems.¹² "The Fisherman" reveals his realization that he had spent more than half his life attempting to write poetry equal to the finest poetry of all time, but that he is writing for "A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream."

T. S. Eliot was interested first in Byron and other Romantic poets. As a college student he read Jules Laforgue, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Arthur Symons's The Symbolist Movement in Literature, and Dante. From Laforgue he learned that his own speech idiom had possibilities; from Baudelaire that his urban experiences were material for poetry and that he could produce striking effects by juxtaposing the realistic and the fantastic.¹³ Dante's theory of the soul influenced Eliot's conception of the author as moral guide, and the doctrine of moral responsibility forms the deepest theme of most of his poetry and all of his plays. Phillip Headings points out that throughout Eliot's work a "male persona with deep sympathy for his fellow men and a strong sense of moral and social responsibility examines the lives around him and raises 'overwhelming' questions."¹⁴ Dante provided the "psychology and moral perspective for the personae" who inhabited his poems.¹⁵

As a young writer, Eliot, like Yeats, found judgment according

to meaning predominating over criticism and likewise went to his own temporary kind of aestheticism, leaning toward aesthetic principles to avoid the moralist position. Stead says, "Eliot not only affirmed the Symbolists' non-discursive mode; he perfected it, as Yeats failed to perfect it."¹⁶

The persona technique in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, an early poem, reveals the influence of both Pound and Yeats. The poem is a dialogue between the inner and outer selves of the reticent, middle-aged Prufrock. Northrup Frye points out that the narrators in the earlier poetry are "created characters speaking with the poet's voice but not for him," whereas in the later poetry the speaker of the poem is "a persona of the poet himself."¹⁷ Containing several literary allusions, the poem combines and juxtaposes the remote and familiar, the traditional and contemporary, and mixes "the grand and deflated style."¹⁸ In the early works such as Prufrock and Sweeney Among the Nightingales, the "overt connections between the various materials making up the poem--are omitted and must be supplied by the reader via the inferences he can draw, which gradually make him aware of the precise center from which the poem is spoken."¹⁹

By 1917 Eliot, like Yeats, spoke of recovering "the accents of direct speech" in poetry.²⁰ Stead recognizes three "voices" speaking in Eliot's poetry after 1938: (1) the poet talking to himself or nobody; (2) the poet addressing the audience; (3) the poet creating a dramatic

character speaking in verse to another imaginary character. Four Quartets (1943) alternates between the 'first voice of poetry, the voice of 'The Waste Land'. . . and the 'second voice, ' the voice of a man 'addressing an audience' in verse distinguished from prose."²¹ Headings says that by the time Eliot wrote The Cocktail Party (1949), he had allied his verse to rhythms of modern English speech, bringing his flexible three stress-and-a-caesura line under control so that he could "modulate in it from the most prosaic-sounding lines to high moments of intense poetry."²²

Eliot, like Yeats, stressed what the poem is rather than what it says. Inspiration and technique were primary, meaning secondary. In After Strange Gods (1934) Eliot says that the concern should be not with the author's beliefs but with the "orthodoxy of sensibility" and the "sense of tradition." Though he may be "passionately concerned" with a cause, his preoccupation with technique and the "discipline his soul has learned in the School of Tradition will ensure a more lasting image and more accurate evaluation of his subject matter."²³ Stead notes that the Four Quartets mark an important change in Eliot's method of composition, mainly in the increase of structural ordering. "The poem has been directed, however gently, by the conscious will."²⁴ He points out that despite the demands of the reading public, both Yeats and Eliot--using different techniques, "avoided "the isolation of 'aesthetic' and 'moral' qualities in poetry, to achieve a fusion of these into a new wholeness."²⁵

There was a gradual shift in Eliot's pattern of development from the symbolist to the discursive in poetry, the aesthetic to the moral in criticism, and from the esoteric to the popular. After he joined the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England and became a naturalized British citizen in 1927, he turned from "a satiric to a devotional poet."²⁶ His doctrine of social responsibility now turned him toward drama as a form of expression more public than poetry.

Again, like Yeats, Eliot had decided at the beginning of his career that "the only better thing than addressing a large audience is to address the one hypothetical Intelligent Man who does not exist and who is the audience of the artist."²⁷ Though the response to his first work was unenthusiastic, by the early 1930's modernism had ceased to be modernism and was poetry with Eliot as the dominant figure.

Robert Frost's career as a poet began at sixteen when he was inspired to write a ballad after reading Prescott's Conquest of Mexico. He read prolifically during these early years, occasionally selling a poem to The Independent. Due to ill health, financial problems, and depression, he left first Dartmouth, then Harvard, to educate himself, write poetry, farm, and teach in an attempt to support his growing family.

At nineteen he discovered while reading Shakespeare "the interplay and the natural intonations of the spoken sentence."²⁸ He decided to try to achieve these qualities in his own poetry. From his farmer friend John Hall and other New Englanders he discovered anew

that "talking tones of voice should determine an important part of form in prose or verse."²⁹ He knew that Yeats and Synge, with the help of the Abbey Players, were constantly urging that poetry and prose should return to the natural rhythms and intonations of speech. Also, the Georgians joined the course in their anthology Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912. In reviewing the book, Edward Thomas said that the Georgians dramatized in their poems "the most absolute necessity of speaking in a natural voice and in the language of today."³⁰

Frost likely noticed the space American periodicals gave to a speech Yeats made in London in March, 1911, protesting that "the voice" had fallen into neglect as the vehicle for communication in literary art.³¹ That fall Yeats came to the United States again stressing the attempt to capture the "natural speech of ordinary people," a way of talking "redeemed from the idiom which we speak and in which our newspapers are written--an idiom dim and defaced like a coin too long in circulation."³² These were all incentives for Frost to continue in the direction he had started. The theory of poetry which he was developing was based on the conviction that "'talk' was most dramatic and poetic when the sentences were lean and sharp with the give-and-take of conversation, wherein the thread of thought and action ran quickly in words and did not become lost in a maze of adjectives and metaphors."³³

In his first book, A Boy's Will (1913), published a year after Frost had sold his New England farm and moved his family to England,

the arrangement of lyrics amounts to implied dialogue between two opposed selves of the poet. Even when only one voice speaks, he tries to "imply, dramatically, a listener who is addressed and silenced by the speaking voice."³⁴

The vignettes which Frost had composed about back-country New Englanders paved the way for the dramatic narratives, many of which appear in his second book, North of Boston (1914). Even in the lyrics there is at least an element of the dramatic. John R. Doyle, Jr., points out, "With his great love of people and of talk, it was natural for Frost to show early an interest in the dramatic method,"³⁵ which is found throughout his work in various types of poems. Both Frost and Eliot adapted the Browning dramatic monologue for their own use. The strongly dramatic phase of Frost's work comes early; the strongly lyric phase, which also contains elements of the dramatic, comes during the middle years.

Both Frost and Yeats wrote simple, direct lyrics which can be read on the literal level but which use images as symbols. Both use repetition with variation to extend the force that the image generates as a symbol in a short lyric. They are close to their material, though one is never as sure with Frost as with Yeats that the experience is his. Frost disagreed with some of Yeats's historical ideas, and their treatment of time contrasts sharply--Frost's lyrics being timeless, Yeats's stressing specific historical times.

On the surface, Frost and Eliot are far apart: Eliot's poems

contain much uncommon learning, Frost's mostly farm knowledge; Eliot's use primarily city settings and characters, Frost's rural scenes and characters; Eliot's have an "intellectual structure," Frost's a "natural" structure.

One element is common in the development of all three poets: the tendency toward natural speech in poetry. A 1942 issue of Partisan Review contains Eliot's contention: "At some periods, the task is to explore the musical possibilities of an established convention of the relation of the idiom of verse to that of speech; at other periods the task is to catch up with the changes of colloquial speech."³⁶ Just as Eliot tried to make poetry from the idiom of his day, Frost tried to make poetry out of conversation and Yeats attempted to "catch the natural speech of ordinary people." Other points of agreement include their interest in the dramatic and their determination to write well, even if it meant writing for "A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream."

How does Tolson's pattern of development differ from that of his distinguished contemporaries? Why did it take so long to evolve a satisfactory style? Why only three books of poetry at the age of sixty-six? In some ways his work parallels that of one or the other of these poets, in a few ways all three. But there is one notable determinant which may well have made all the difference.

Like the others, he first attempted to write poetry as an adolescent, contributing to high school and college newspapers and journals.

His financial difficulties and acquaintance with various types of odd jobs, culminating in a teaching career, is similar to Frost's story. Both he and Frost were successful debate coaches and directors of plays. Both struggled to rear and educate their four children. Neither published more than a few poems in periodicals before the publication of their first book, Frost's at the age of thirty-nine, Tolson's at forty-four.

Like Yeats, Eliot, and Frost, Tolson was first attracted to the Romantic and Victorian writers,³⁷ whom he studied in school. Their influence, quite apparent in Rendezvous With America (1944), was partially broken as he turned to the modern poets in the late forties and was severed finally in his revision of Libretto.

The pattern of Tolson's stylistic development forms an interesting contrast in some ways to that of the other three poets. Like Yeats he found his materials in the folk. He never turned from these materials, though his style underwent much change. A few of the poems in Rendezvous reveal his interest in experimentation with form, but most of them illustrate instead his ability to manage many different types of traditional form. The Libretto shows a marked change in style. The influence of the New Poetry is obvious in the special learning, quotations in many languages, widespread allusions, and juxtaposition of various kinds. This change contrasts with the tendency of Eliot, Yeats, Frost, and other major writers to return to common speech in their poetry. How then can the learned style of

Libretto (1953) be accounted for? Tolson was aware of the current stylistic trends.

He knew them, but he had spent years absorbing and adapting to the modernist style. At first he had been prejudiced against it; eventually he was converted, and the blend of intellectual style and folk materials made for a happy wedding, leading to the technique which marks Harlem Gallery. From the beginning Tolson's objective was excellence. If the best of the New Poetry was synonymous with show-of-learning and intellect (as it had been in the beginning), then he could out-modernize the best of them, or, in Shapiro's words "outpound Pound."³⁸ When Tate dismissed the original version of Libretto, Tolson recalled Eliot's formula for avoiding "opinion" and rhetoric as set forth in After Strange Gods: concentrate on technique. Technique it would be.

In Harlem Gallery he relaxes somewhat stylistically. He has proved what he set out to prove, and in this work he goes back to the dramatic method which was natural to him, as one who had a "great love of people and of talk," as it was to Frost. He ranges easily in this work from intellectual word-play to the idiom of the Harlem ghetto. The allusions and special learning are still there, but the sometimes-strained quality of Libretto is gone. There is little of the common-speech element emphasized by the major contemporary poets, but Tolson has found his voice by juxtaposing the literary and literal worlds in which he lived.

Although he did not emphasize common speech as the other poets did in their later work, he did employ some of the same techniques. Most critics of Tolson comment on Eliot's influence on his usage of special learning, widespread allusions, and juxtaposition in both content and style. Just as Yeats wished to be spokesman to the world for the Irish, Tolson wanted to reveal "the souls of black folk." His keen awareness of his responsibility as a black poet and his dedication to his craft made for an almost impossible situation at times, a problem which he probes deeply in Harlem Gallery.

In this work, he uses a persona. Like the other poets, he is close to his subject matter, but it is difficult to say when the Curator is Tolson and when he is not unless the reader is already acquainted with his stance on the various subjects discussed in the Gallery. His humor is Frostian at times, but he departs from the whimsical tone to range from black rage to slapstick. As the others had done at various times in their careers, he had resigned himself to the likelihood, as he entered his sixties, that he was writing not for his contemporaries but hopefully for the future.

His ability to accommodate various forms and techniques is revealed in the range of his work. Harlem Gallery is a kind of ode, a narrative poem, and a dramatic poem. The lines range from free verse to set metrical patterns, from the folk ballad to Eliot-like lines void of conscious links. This work is a unique treatment of the Afro-American in the modern intellectual vein.

Having absorbed the tradition of the Western World and studied the trends of the established twentieth-century poets, what then delayed Tolson's development?

First, he never enjoyed the leisure a writer needs for study, contemplation, creativity. From the time he was old enough to work, he held jobs ranging from shoeshine boy to cook on a pullman car. When he was graduated from Lincoln University, he began a teaching career which extended to the final months of his life. His normal schedule was a heavy load--often five three-hour courses--in addition to such extracurricular activities as coaching the debate team or directing dramatic productions. Keenly aware of civic duties and a responsibility to help his people in any way possible, he served four terms as mayor of Langston and rarely turned down any of the hundreds of requests he received to serve as speaker for commencement exercises, NAACP meetings, and other groups.

But he was not the first poet to lead a busy, time-consuming life which sapped his writing time and energy. The essential difference in the developmental pattern of Tolson and many more productive writers was his isolation from fellow artists and literary activity in general. Ellmann's work Eminent Domain traces the interaction of Wilde, Pound, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, and other writers of the period on one another. Even when their dialogues turned into harangues they were developing as a result of their encounters. Tolson had no other artists with whom to discuss his work. His brief association with

V. F. Calverton, editor of the Modern Quarterly, served as an inspiration throughout his life. Seldom did he make a talk in which he did not mention Calverton's name. Occasionally his path would cross another writer's--Edwin Markham came to Wylie College to speak; Tolson once had tea with W. H. Auden--but these occasions were rare and brief. He read all the little magazines he could and kept up with modern trends in this way, but it had taken years for him to master traditional forms to his satisfaction. He adapted to modern techniques when it became apparent that the best poetry appeared in the new forms. He could versify easily, but he had little respect for the "poetry" of the Beatnik bards and revised his work painstakingly, infinitely. His formula consisted, as he said, of one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration. The choice he made early in life was to write for the vertical audience of the future, regardless of the response of the horizontal audience of the present. A perfectionist, he found it extremely difficult to satisfy his own demands on himself.

Frost had similar problems when he was struggling for years in his New England farmhouse, far removed from the cultural scene. At thirty-eight he had been writing poetry for twenty years, had published no book, and had seen only ten of his poems appear in periodicals. In a spirit of desperation he sold his Derry farm and sailed for England with his wife and children. Only seven poems in his first book had appeared in print before, and of these the three

later ones show a definite superiority to the earlier ones. Doyle states bluntly, "The truth seems to be that Robert Frost developed slowly. Yet once the first book was in print, he had a second one ready within months," All except three of the poems in North of Boston were written in England after September, 1912. What was responsible for this sudden explosion into creativity, this instant-maturity?

Frost had always had the desire to write and the courage to withstand disappointment. He had spent twenty years improving his techniques, enlarging his scope, gathering and storing material for his poems. The same can be said for Tolson at a similar period in his life. But whereas Frost's first book immediately gave rise to a second, nine years intervene between the publication of Tolson's Rendezvous and Libretto, twelve years between Libretto and Harlem Gallery. Frost's move to England obviously was the catalyst which generated his productivity. What were his motivating experiences there?

Doyle points out that life in England gave to Frost three things he had never had before: (1) detachment from the New England scene, which provided perspective; (2) favorable environment for a poet whose vocation was always considered odd by New Englanders; (3) association with literary people who both thought and talked about literature. "In this atmosphere the waters of his fountain of creation which he had stirred so ceaselessly for twenty years became jewel clear and poured forth poem after poem." ³⁹ He had not been in

England long when he met F. S. Flint at a meeting to discuss poetry in Harold Munro's bookshop. Flint wrote Pound about him, and Pound invited Frost to visit him. Pound then wrote a favorable review--the first magazine review of any kind for Frost--which was published in Poetry. This review brought him to the attention of Harriet Monroe, Amy Lowell, and other literary figures.

In addition, Frost felt for the first time that he was a part of his community. His neighbor and friend was Lascelles Abercrombie, poet and critic. The poet Edward Thomas became a dear friend as did Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Wilson Gibson.

What these people here and the less close ones in London gave Frost was the last element he needed: proof that he had something to say and that he had found a way to say it. These were not fellow farmers, villagers, high school principals, students. These were men who knew the literature of the world, and Frost had no claims upon them. If they accepted him, it was proof that they wanted to have him with them. If they praised his poems, it was proof that they believed that the poems had a value. This was the greatest gift they could have bestowed, and it was not wasted when given to Robert Frost.⁴⁰

This was precisely the kind of understanding and encouragement Tolson needed, but the Eliots, Pounds, and Abercrombies were far

removed from Marshall, Texas, and Langston, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Tolson has said many times that if her husband had chosen to put his work before his family, as many writers have done, he could have developed much sooner. But he had a dream for his family --a dream which perhaps only a black American can fully appreciate. This dream was fulfilled when Mrs. Tolson and his daughter Ruth Marie were awarded master's degrees and his three sons Ph. D. 's. Furthermore, Tolson was a dynamic person who poured all of his energy into the task at hand. When he taught, as his students said, "Every lecture was a performance." When he coached debate, his teams traveled all over the South and Southwest, going on faith that they would draw large enough audiences that they could meet expenses, winning one debate after another for ten consecutive years. When he turned to directing dramatic productions, he channeled his efforts and enthusiasm into building a dramatic program of excellence at Wylie College. A letter to "The Contributors' Column" of the Atlantic Monthly in 1941 makes clear the time he was devoting to this project:

At the present time I am trying to build, on our campus, the Log Cabin School of Drama and Speech. An ex-slave has given us several acres of timber; a white plumber and four Negro carpenters are giving their services; a white printer is getting out the propaganda; and in general, the boys and girls are scouring the regions with the collection boxes. We

aren't discouraged, for we've covered thousands of miles on our debate and drama tours with bad brakes, bad motors, bad tires, and bad drivers. Give us time, and we'll have Negro theatres springing up in cotton patches! We'll take what we have and make what we want."⁴¹

This was Tolson--no matter what the task. Although the theatre was never completed, much of his writing time drained into the project. As M. B., Jr., said recently, "When I consider how many different things Dad did, how completely he gave himself to whatever he did, the question that comes to my mind is not "Why did he write so little?" but "How did he write so much?"⁴² He had an abundance of talents and the inability to say "No" when he was called upon. To shut himself off from his family and friends was not living for him. He loved people with a vigor noticeable even to those who knew him only briefly. A novelist who had talked with him two or three times paid this tribute to him shortly after his death:

Tolson's life was devoted to . . . [a] belief in the essential sameness of men, and their common need for a decent chance to grow. As he himself grew as a poet, he became a clear, strong voice for friendship and love . . . if Tolson had any quality that was most impressive, it was his uncanny ability to make every person he met feel

special--important. He was a superbly successful human being whose love for his fellow men gave him a vitality unique in my experience.⁴³

Even though one of the most important things in life to Tolson was to be a first-rate poet (remember Hideho's fear that if he died with no poems "in World Lit--he'd be a statistic!"), he could not save himself for his poetry. Among his notes are the "Five Steps of a Man": (1) the non-human or feral; (2) the human; (3) the humane; (4) the humanistic; (5) the humanitarian. The decisions Tolson made throughout his life indicate that when he was forced to choose between his fellow man and his writing, his poetry came second.

Practically all critics and reviewers of Tolson's work agree that his accomplishments as a poet should have been recognized long before the publication of Harlem Gallery in 1965. They account in various ways for his being ignored through the years despite the efforts of such eminent critics and poets as Robert Frost, John Ciardi, Karl Shapiro, Theodore Roethke, and others. Shapiro says he was ignored because he was a Negro.⁴⁴ Josephine Jacobsen calls Shapiro's statement a "bizarre simplification" and suggests instead that his "refusal to be pushed into an inflexible stance, his ground held between two schools of absolutists"⁴⁵ is a better reason. Virginia Scott Miner says that his use of the long poem rather than the short poems of comparable worth may account partially for his late recognition.⁴⁶ Robert Donald Spector points to what may well

be one of the most valid reasons for his neglect: ". . . here is a poet whose language, comprehensiveness, and values demand a critical sensitivity rarely found in any establishment."⁴⁷

Karl Shapiro, in his Introduction to Harlem Gallery, sets forth the challenge to all those who would evaluate Tolson's work.

It is not enough to equate Tolson, as his best critics have done, with Eliot or Hart Crane, the CANTOS or ANABASE. To make him equal is to miss the point, just as it would be to make him better than. Tolson writes and thinks in Negro, which is to say, a possible American language. He is therefore performing the primary poetic rite for our literature. Instead of purifying the tongue, which is the business of the Academy, he is complicating it, giving it the gift of tongues. Pound, Eliot, and Joyce did this; but with a pernicious nostalgia that all but killed the patient. Tolson does it naturally and to the manner born.⁴⁸

One difficulty in assessing Tolson's work is that he does not fit a category. Akin to Eliot, Pound, and Hart Crane in some ways, his content is so foreign to theirs that it seems irrelevant to attempt to compare their work. Spector, in reviewing Harlem Gallery for Saturday Review, states that Tolson "stands far from and above contemporary accomplishment," then turns from poetry to

Paul Goodman's novel The Empire City for a work with which to compare it. Yet this comparison, too, he finds unsatisfactory, for "Tolson's poetry, unlike Goodman's prose, creates its bizarre atmosphere in a disciplined esthetic form."⁴⁹

It is equally difficult to compare him with other Negro writers, for his work is quite different from theirs though he draws upon the same sources and is quick to affirm their kinship. He studied T. S. Eliot's style diligently for years, yet found "more faith in [James Weldon Johnson's] God's Trombones than in the Four Quartets."⁵⁰ Langston Hughes was a good friend--they had addressed many audiences together. Their styles contrast sharply, but they both write of the folk and the tribute paid to Hughes and his best-known character, Jesse B. Semple, might well have been written about Tolson and one of his Harlem Gallery patrons:

Politics wasn't his true concern. His people were, especially the people in his adopted Harlem--and the ways of white folks. His mouthpiece was the wry, ironic, crafty, folkloristic, garrulous, beer-swilling, homegrown barfly philosopher Mr. Jesse B. Semple, known as Simple (simple like a fox), a man who, once he got his hands on your lapels, never let go, a hilarious black Socrates of the neighborhood saloons who would at the drop of a hat discourse on anything from marital relations to international

relations, lynching to lexicography, the foibles of mankind and the follies of womankind. . . . the pervasive sentiment of Hughes was one of sorrow and anger, love and compassion, the former directed at the exclusion of the Negro from a lily-white America, the latter at his people everywhere.⁵¹

Tolson admired the craftsmanship of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and many other Negro writers, but his work is so unlike theirs in technique that one can hardly compare him with them. In the 1968 Christmas issue of the New York Review of Books, Jack Richardson names him, along with Ellison and Wright, as one of those writers whose work must be confronted when one looks for "fullness of expression in black literature" and states that their work is "a part of a people's consciousness and it has set standards of nuance and truth that any writer can learn from."⁵² James Dickey expressed the opinion that Tolson may very well be acknowledged in years to come as the outstanding black poet of the twentieth century.⁵³

Although Tolson's ambition was to make a worthy contribution to American literature as a black poet using folk materials and to clarify the role of the Afro-American in the development of this nation, he, like Yeats, anticipated little response from his black reading audience. Unlike his good friend, Langston Hughes, who wrote primarily for Negroes, he believed that his function as a Negro poet was to try to write poetry of and about his people which

would stand artistically with that of any poet. He anticipated a three-fold reaction from black readers: some would understand and appreciate his work; many would never complete it because of its difficulty and therefore dismiss it as being unreadable or ignore it; others would frown upon his "crudity" in writing of "Mister Jelly Roll/ with his Cadillac and diamond tooth," a Negro dockhand who orders chitterlings in a white restaurant, and the variety of Harlem low-brows whom he pictures so vividly.

At the time of his death the movement toward a Black Aesthetic was just beginning to come into focus. This separatist movement demands that the black writer write for a black audience and black critics only. Though Tolson would have understood the frustrations out of which this movement was born and would undoubtedly have been sympathetic with many of its manifestations, his vision for America was never a separation of peoples but a multiracial culture composed of many kinds of American artists, each preserving the qualities of his particular race for the enlightenment and appreciation of all mankind. Because of this broad concept of the role of the black artist and its application in his own work, it is understandable that his work, which obviously was not written for the average black--or white--reader, is not considered of importance at the present time by many of the adherents of the Black Consciousness Movement.

The January, 1968, issue of Negro Digest carried the results of a poll of some thirty-three black writers and critics concerning,

among other literary questions, the most important Afro-American writers, whom they named in this order: Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, and W. E. B. Dubois. They concluded that the three most important Negro poets of this century are Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Gwendolyn Brooks.⁵⁴ In this issue, devoted entirely to black writers, Tolson's name appears only once--in a review of an anthology of Afro-American poetry, Kaleidoscope, edited by poet Robert Hayden. The reviewer, Don Lee, a young black poet, dismisses Tolson in one sentence: "Melvin B. Tolson is represented with some of his less obscure poetry which still exhibits his range and his capacity to lose the people that may read him."⁵⁵ Ironically, perhaps, an article highlighting the work of Lee as black writer-in-residence at Cornell University includes a quotation from Tolson's "The Poet" to delineate the role of Lee as a leader in the Black Aesthetic Movement:

A Champion of the People versus Kings--

His only martyrdom is poetry:

A hater of the hierarchy of things--

Freedom's need is his necessity.⁵⁶

Shortly after this poem appeared in Rendezvous With America twenty-five years before, a reviewer had quoted the same lines and applied them to their author: "Tolson is what he declares of fellow singers in "The Poet," "A champion of the People versus Kings"⁵⁷

In Lee's review of Kaleidoscope, Tolson comes off well, however, compared to Hayden, a widely-known black poet of whose "belligerent ignorance" Lee writes because he referred to black poets as Negro instead of black. Hayden, he continues, is one of those black poets who perpetuate the "very dangerous myth" that poets other than black poets or critics are qualified to judge black poetry.

I believe that this is an absurdity to say the least; how can one who is not a part of our culture, a part of our immediate life, a part of us, judge us? How can they, WASP, have a proper perspective to work from? If there is to be judgement, then we, as Afro-Americans, are better prepared to pass judgment on them. We blacks have a much wider perspective to work from for we are the products of a dual culture, ie., Shakespeare during the day and LeRoi Jones at night, or Americanism during the day and survival at night.⁵⁸

Lee's comments here set forth one of the chief tenets of the Black Aesthetic movement. The black writer should write for black readers, who alone are qualified to judge his work. He apparently dismisses Tolson because of "his capacity to lose the people that they may read him." Of course, this was an accusation with which he had lived since he turned to the modernist idiom in the 1950's. This decision, he was aware, would limit his horizontal

audience, would be the object of criticism for some, would cause him to be ignored by others as too difficult to bother with, but once he had accepted the fact that it was the technique with which he could do his best work, it was the only decision he could live with as an artist. He justifies it through the Curator's words in "Omega," the concluding section of Harlem Gallery:

Should he
 skim the milk of culture for the elite
 and give the "lesser breeds"
 a popular latex brand?
 Should he
 (to increase digestibility)
 break up
 the fat globules and vitamins and casein shreds?
 (p. 167)

For the artist, there can be but one answer:

Tonic spasms of wind and wave
 assail compass and lamp in the cabined night;
 but the binnacle of the imagination
 steers the work of art aright--
 (p. 167)

If this intellectual style be found wanting, his defense is that the artist must be free to excell in whatever way the "binnacle of the imagination" steers him:

White Boy,

Black Boy,

freedom is the oxygen

of the studio and gallery.

What if a chef-d'oeuvre is esoteric?

The cavernous By Room, with its unassignable variety

of ego-dwarfing

stalactites and stalagmites,

makes my veins and arteries vibrate faster

as I study its magnificence and intricacy.

Is it amiss or odd

if the apes of God

take a cue from their Master?

(p. 169)

Sarah Webster Fabio of Merritt College in California typifies the "Black Aesthetic" critic in her accusation that Tolson cultivated a "vast, bizarre, pseudo-literary diction" to meet the demands of the Establishment, while many Negro poets were abandoning Pound and Eliot to meet the needs of their race.⁵⁹ In like manner, Don Lee castigates black writers who worry about being judged and criticized and therefore inevitably write for "critics, for WASP, for National Book Awards" [a direct attack on Ellison]. He says that a black poet must set the literary standards for his time, which he cannot do by "prostituting" himself for critics or imitating other poets.

Miss Fabio and Lee do not represent the thinking of all Afro-American critics today, of course. Clinton Oliver of Queens College, Flushing, New York, whose doctoral dissertation at Harvard was "The Name and Nature of American Negro Literature," commented about Miss Fabio's criticism of Tolson:

Tolson is one of our major voices. This is criticism brought not only against Tolson but against Ellison, and it dismisses the richness of Western Tradition. It is too simplistic. Africans do not discard French culture. They build upon it. The New Breed following Leroi Jones forget Dante's influence on him. DuBois too used techniques he learned at Harvard and in Germany and applied them to his people. I think Harlem Gallery is one of the great works of its time.

61

Saunders Redding, distinguished author and critic for many years, does not see any future for that school of black writers which seeks to establish a "black aesthetic," at least not in America. He says, ". . . aesthetics has no racial, national or geographical boundaries. Beauty and truth, the principal components of aesthetics, are universal." This "conservative" attitude is not limited to the older writers, though most of the young writers favor the Black Consciousness movement. Alice Walker, a talented young Georgia writer, sounds much like Eliot or Yeats when she says that black writers should direct their work toward an "imaginary ideal audience that

67

will appreciate what they have to say, and profit from it." She believes ". . . it is only important that we write from within ourselves and that we direct our efforts outward. Period. I would have liked for Victor Hugo to like my stories quite as much as I admire his,"⁶³ These comments by Miss Fabio and Lee on the one hand and Oliver, Redding, and Miss Walker on the other make clear the dichotomy which exists among black writers today.

During his lifetime Tolson was always considered one of the most outspoken "radicals" in the Civil Rights movement. His long-time friend and fellow writer, Arna Bontemps, said that he had the courage to "carry the ball" way back when such courage was rarely demonstrated openly.⁶⁴ Had the time he dedicated to NAACP work (an organization considered liberal and radical by many at that time) and the energy he expended in teaching and inspiring countless Negro college students that they could, by hard work, compete well with white graduates from Ivy League colleges or anywhere else, gone into the writing of poetry, his literary output would have been far more substantial than it is. The theme of his poetry is his people, but he chose, instead of addressing himself only to a black audience, to use the Negro as a symbol of all who are oppressed and seek the freedom which is rightfully theirs, thus raising the black man to a universal level. Although he and Ellison disagreed over terminology as to whether their role should be the artist or Negro artist, both succeed in making the experiences of the black man meaningful to all mankind.

The courage Tolson exemplified when he dared the wrath of Southern whites to preach his message of hope and human rights is the same courage he embodies as a poet. In his poetry he was just as outspoken concerning the injustices meted out to the underprivileged as he had been in those midnight speeches in south Texas back in the twenties and thirties. Believing that the poet must have the oxygen of freedom to create beauty and truth as he sees it, he dared to satirize not only the tyranny of the whites but the hypocrisies of the "Black Bourgeoisie," finding beauty in lowbrow Negro society at a time when many black people wished to ignore this subject. What some of the contemporary black critics seem to overlook is that at the time he wrote, the criteria for art was that of the Great White World, which meant that a black poet trying to show the world that a black poet could write as well as any other poet had to compete in the only frame of reference available. He could, of course, have directed his poetry to a black audience as Langston Hughes and some other black poets did, but he made the choice which he believed would be most meaningful to him and his people for years to come. Whether his choice was right or wrong--whether, as Miss Fabio says, Pound is "out" permanently and Tolson with him, only time will tell.

Tolson came to realize, like Yeats, that his reputation would never be established by his own people, but he always took great pride in speaking of himself as a Negro poet, as opposed to those black writers who emphasized that they were writers first. Again,

like Yeats, he believed the most valuable contribution he could make to his race was to achieve a high level of artistry with folk materials, not by limiting his audience to his people only. Abraham Chapman, editor of a recent anthology of Negro literature, Black Voices, points out this affinity of Yeats to the best Afro-American writers:

In his poetic approach, Yeats united three components which to others may seem irreconcilable or incompatible: to express the personal and private self, to express the common humanity the individual shares with all men, and to express the ethnic or racial self with its particular mythology and cultural past. If for "Irishry" we substitute black or Negro consciousness we can see that the best of the Afro-American writers have been struggling to express and blend the three components Yeats speaks of and a fourth as well, which has made the situation of the black writer in America even more complex: their personal selves, their universal humanity, the particular qualities and beauty of their blackness and ethnic specificity, and their American selves. These are not separate and boxed-off compartments of the mind and soul, but the inseparable and intermingled elements of a total human being, of a whole person who blends diversities within himself. This is the rich blend we find in the best of the Negro American artists.

Though Tolson has been criticized by some black writers and ignored by others, there are those who are very much aware of the contribution he has made to Negro literature and to world literature. Gwendolyn Brooks, the only Negro poet ever to be awarded the Pulitzer prize (1950), supports the trend toward establishing a Black Aesthetic, yet she stated recently that Tolson should have been awarded the Pulitzer prize for Harlem Gallery.⁶⁶ James A. Emmanuel and Theodore L. Gross, editors of Dark Symphony, a recent anthology of Negro literature (1968), speak of "the startling waywardness of the poet's genius" and say that his "contribution to the Negro tradition in American poetry, merging high-blown intellectualism with 'ham, hocks, ribs, and jowls' straight from Harlem, is secure."⁶⁷ It is interesting that the very "crudity" which was criticized before the present black cultural renaissance now constitutes the quality seemingly most worthy of praise--that which is different in black and white cultures, such as soul food. Another complimentary review appeared in The Negro History Bulletin, in which lecturer Dolphin G. Thompson, points out that Tolson "demonstrated a superb poetic talent in Rendezvous," that Libretto "struck with hurricane force in the citadel of letters" and was promptly "consigned to death in a conspiracy of silence," which he blames on "artistic jealousy and shame." Thompson claims for Tolson a significant place in world literature, describing Harlem Gallery in these words: "He has taken the language of American and the idiom of the world

to fashion a heroic declaration of, about, and for the Negro in America. It is a book that should be on every bookshelf. . . . In addition to mastering poetical techniques he has initiated a style of dramatically lifting the Negro experience to a classical grace."⁶⁸

Though there is divided opinion about Tolson's work among both black and white critics owing in part to its undeniable difficulty, to its limited quantity, and its uniqueness in both American "white" and "black" literatures, it is a contribution which cannot be denied.

Emmanuel and Gross predict that the immediate future of his reputation may depend upon the rise of Negro critics and their attitude

toward the new "Black Aesthetic."⁶⁹ Tolson was not as concerned with the present or immediate future as with the long-range picture.

At this time Harlem Gallery is less than five years old. Shapiro's words about Libretto twelve years after its publication are just as applicable to Harlem Gallery now: it "speaks for itself. . . .

Possibly it is too early for the assimilation of such a poem, even by poets."⁷⁰

Tolson's work marks him as an intellectual poet whose poetry offers a wealth of material for critics to consider for years to come, though it is contained in only three small volumes. One indication that his star is rising is the recent decision of Collier Publishing Company to bring out all three books in paperback. This will put Rendezvous, the most readable of the three for the general public, back in print for the first time in some twenty years and may increase

his reading public considerably.

His decision to sacrifice quantity for quality and, when necessary, art for life was in keeping with the integrity he maintained as artist and man despite pressures of various kinds. When he realized that time would not permit him to complete the five-volume epic of the Negro in America, he knew that the place he had hoped to carve for himself as a representative of his people might well be affected by his limited productivity. Hardy's "artistry of circumstance" had caught up with him once more, for now that he had evolved the technique for which he had worked so long and had retired from the teaching profession, his only need was time--but the hourglass was almost empty. As he looked back on his life, however, he was a happy man.⁷¹ His family had the security of good educations; as artist, he had kept the faith through numerous temptations--like John Laugart ("Zeta," p. 41), he had never sold "mohair for alpaca/ to ring the bell!"; as man, he always "had more beds to sleep in and more dinner invitations" than he could ever find time to accept. He would have been pleased with the tribute which would appear in an Oklahoma newspaper after his death: ". . . he was a superbly successful human being."

His sensitivity as an American Negro dictated the subjects and themes of his poetry; his artistic imagination and intellect dictated the technique. He had done what he had to do. There were those who found fault with his work, and many others who agreed with Spector,

that regardless of his reputation in the "present critical climate," he stands "firmly as a great American poet."⁷² His contribution would be decided after he was gone by that vertical audience for which he had written. He seldom broached the subject of death in those last days in the Dallas, Texas, hospital, but undoubtedly the lines he had penned some twenty years before in south Texas were running through his mind:

I harbor
 One fear
 If death
 Crouch near.
 Does my
 Creed span
 The Gulf
 Of Man?

 And when
 I go
 In calm
 Or blow
 From mice
 And men,
 Selah!
 What . . . then?

NOTES

- ¹Richard Ellmann, Eminent Domain (New York, 1967), p. 29.
- ²Ibid., p. 11.
- ³The New Poetic (London, 1964), p. 29.
- ⁴Ellmann, p. 26.
- ⁵Stead, p. 132.
- ⁶"What Ireland Now Offers Us" (anon. rev.), Literary Digest XLIII (October 14, 1911), 632.
- ⁷Stead, p. 33.
- ⁸Ellmann, p. 66.
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 66-67.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 68.
- ¹¹Essays (1961), pp. 223, 227; reprinted in Stead, p. 17.
- ¹²Stead, pp. 26-31.
- ¹³"A Talk on Dante," Kenyon Review, XIV (Spring 1952), 179-180.

¹⁴T. S. Eliot (New York, 1964), p. 32.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot (New York, 1963), p. 48.

¹⁸Headings, p. 17.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 50.

²⁰Stead, p. 86.

²¹p. 178.

²²Headings, p. 143.

²³Stead, p. 134.

²⁴p. 170.

²⁵p. 191.

²⁶Frye, p. 3.

²⁷Athenaeum, May 9, 1919; reprinted in Stead, p. 109.

²⁸Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost, The Early Years, 1874-

1915 (New York, 1966), p. 155.

²⁹Thompson, p. 289.

³⁰Poetry and Drama, I, No. 1 (March 1931), 52.

³¹"The Evils of Too Much Print" (anon. rev.), Literary Digest
(March 11, 1911), p. 461.

³²"What Ireland Now Offers Us," p. 632.

³³Thompson, p. 361.

³⁴Ibid., p. 429.

³⁵The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 52.

³⁶"The Music of Poetry," IX, No. 6 (November-December),
461-462.

³⁷Both Frost and Tolson wrote "Poe" short stories early in their careers--Frost as a high school student, Tolson as a young teacher at Wiley College. See Appendix A for excerpt from Tolson's "The Tragedy of the Yarr Karr," which was printed in the 1926 Wiley College Wild Cat.

³⁸Introduction, Harlem Gallery, p. 12.

³⁹p. 259.

⁴⁰Doyle, p. 262.

⁴¹September, 1941, p. v.

⁴²Conversation, March, 1969.

⁴³Jack Bickham, "A Superbly Successful Human Being," The Oklahoma Courier, September 9, 1966, p. 5.

⁴⁴Introduction, Harlem Gallery, p. 13.

⁴⁵"Books in Review," The (Baltimore, Md.) Evening Sun, November 2, 1965, p. A-20.

⁴⁶A 'Great Poet' Unknown in Our Own Mid-West," The Kansas City Star, July 25, 1965.

⁴⁷"The Poet's Voice in the Crowd," August 7, 1965, p. 29.

⁴⁸p. 11.

⁴⁹"The Poet's Voice in the Crowd," p. 29.

⁵⁰Tolson's unpublished notes.

⁵¹S. M., "The Death of Simple," Newsweek (June 5, 1967), p. 104.

⁵²"The Black Arts," XI, No. 2 (December 19, 1968), 10.

⁵³Telelecture series on contemporary literature originating from Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri, March 5, 1969.

- ⁵⁴"A Survey: Black Writers' Views on Literary Lions and Values," XVII, No. 3, 12-13, 16-18.
- ⁵⁵"On Kaleidoscope and Robert Hayden," Ibid., p. 91.
- ⁵⁶David Llorens, "Black Don Lee," Ebony, XXIV, No. 5 (March 1969), 74.
- ⁵⁷Effie Lee Newsome, "Melvin B. Tolson, Rendezvous With America," The Negro College Quarterly, II, No. 4 (December 1949), 171-172.
- ⁵⁸"On Kaleidoscope and Robert Hayden," p. 90.
- ⁵⁹"Who Speaks Negro?" Negro Digest, XVI, No. 2 (December 1966), 54.
- ⁶⁰"On Kaleidoscope and Robert Hayden," p. 90.
- ⁶¹Seminar on "Definitive Qualities of Black Literature," Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, February 13, 1969.
- ⁶²"Black Writers' Views on Literary Lions and Values," p. 13.
- ⁶³Ibid.
- ⁶⁴Seminar, Negro History Week, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, February 12, 1969.

⁶⁵New York, 1968, p. 40.

⁶⁶Seminar, Negro History Week, Langston University,
Langston, Oklahoma, February 10, 1969.

⁶⁷p. 472.

⁶⁸"Tolson's Gallery Brings Poetry Home," XXIX, No. 3
(December 1965), 69.

⁶⁹Dark Symphony, p. 472.

⁷⁰Introduction, Harlem Gallery, p. 14.

⁷¹Only two months before his death he told his former colleague,
Dr. Walter Jones, Langston University, that he was truly happy and
was so grateful that he had been permitted to see the third of his
three sons awarded the Ph. D.

⁷²"A Poet's Voice in the Crowd," p. 29.

⁷³"Song for Myself," Rendezvous With America, pp. 50-51.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benet, William. "Two Powerful Negro Poets," Saturday Review (March 24, 1945), pp. 35-36.
- Bickham, Jack. "Flowers of Hope," Orbit, The Sunday Oklahoman, August 29, 1965, pp. 6-9.
- _____. "Langston Poet May Signal New Era," The Sunday Oklahoman, May 23, 1965, p. 10.
- _____. "A Superbly Successful Human Being," The Oklahoma Courier, September 9, 1966, p. 5.
- Bontemps, Arna. Seminar, Negro History Week, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, February 12, 1969.
- "Books in Brief; Rendezvous With America," Anon. rev., The Christian Century, LXI (September 20, 1944), 1078-1079.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. Seminar, Negro History Week, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, February 10, 1969.
- Burke, Arthur. "Book Review: Lyrico-Dramatic," The Crisis (January 1945), p. 61.

Chamberlain, Mary Lou. Letter to M. B. Tolson, February 4, 1944.

Chapman, Abraham, ed. Black Voices. New York: The New American Library, 1968.

"Charles Turner Torrey," Encyclopedia Americana (New York, 1953),
XXVI, 710.

Ciardi, John. Letter to Richard L. Brown, Assistant Director,
Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, February 27, 1954 (carbon
copy sent to M. B. Tolson).

_____. "Recent Verse," The Nation (February 27, 1954),
p. 183.

"Contributor's Column," Atlantic Monthly (September 1941), p. 168.

Cowan, Louise. The Fugitive Group. Baton Rouge, Louisiana:
Louisiana State University Press, 1968.

Daiches, David. Literary Essays (1956); reprinted in "Religion,
Poetry, and the 'Dilemma' of the Modern Writer, Perspectives
in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Sheldon N. Grebstein. New
York: Harper and Row, 1968.

Delancey, Rose Mary. "Tolson Hailed As Great Poet," Fort Wayne
News-Sentinel, April 24, 1965, p. 4-A.

Dillon, George. Letter to M. B. Tolson, September 27, 1948.

Doyle, John R. The Poetry of Robert Frost. New York: Hafner Publishing Company, Inc., 1962.

Eliot, T. S. "The Music of Poetry," Partisan Review, IX, No. 6 (November-December, 1942), 450-465.

_____. "A Talk on Dante," Kenyon Review, XIV (Spring 1952), 179-180.

Ellman, Richard. Eminent Domain. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Ellman, Richard and Charles Feidelson, Jr., eds. The Modern Tradition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Emanuel, James A. and Theodore L. Cross, eds. Dark Symphony. New York: The Free Press, 1968.

"The Evils of Too Much Print." Anon. rev., Literary Digest, XLII (March 11, 1911), 461.

Fabio, Sarah Webster. "Who Speaks Negro?" Negro Digest, XVI No. 2 (December 1966), 54-58.

Farmer, James. Equality, n. d. Information among Tolson's unpublished papers.

Flasch, Joy. "Greatness Defined," Letters to the Book Review

Editor, Saturday Review (September 4, 1965), p. 39.

_____. "M. B. Tolson: A Great American Poet," Oklahoma Librarian, XVIII, No. 4 (October 1968), 116-118.

_____. "Obituary," Obsequies of Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, Senior, September 3, 1966.

Frazier, E. Franklin. Black Bourgeoisie. Glencoe, Illinois:

Falcon's Wing Press, 1957.

Frye, Northrup. T. S. Eliot. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963.

Fussell, Paul, Jr. Poetic Meter and Poetic Form. New York:

Random House, 1968.

Goff, Juanita. Conversation, Langston University, January, 1969.

Golding, William. "Notes," Lord of the Flies. New York: Capricorn Books, 1959.

Headings, Phillip. T. S. Eliot. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964.

Hill, Herbert. "In Memory of M. B. Tolson . . . 1900-1966,"

Tuesday (November 1966), p. 26.

Hillyer, Robert. "Among the New Volumes of Verse," New York Times, December 10, 1944, p. 29.

Hughes, Langston. "Here to Yonder," The Chicago Defender (December 15, 1945).

Hyman, Stanley. The Tangled Bank. New York: Atheneum, 1962.

Jacobsen, Josephine. "Books in Review," The (Baltimore, Maryland) Evening Sun, November 2, 1965, p. A-20.

Jones, Walter. Conversation, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, December, 1968.

K., J. "Unprejudiced Poems," Raleigh (North Carolina) Observer, October 8, 1944.

"Langston Hears Poet's 'Odyssey,'" The Daily Oklahoman, April 9, 1965, p. 16.

"Lauded Oklahoma Poet Working Hard After Battle With Cancer," The Daily Oklahoman, February 4, 1965, p. 11.

"Laureate Poet Explains Principles at Banquet," The [Oklahoma State University] Daily O'Collegian, LXXI, No. 90, February 16, 1966, p. 1.

Lee, Don L. "On Kaleidoscope and Robert Hayden," Negro Digest, XVII, No. 3 (January 1968), 51-52, 90-94.

"Let's Erect A Monument," Wiley Texas Reporter, August 23, 1948.

"Liberia Honors Poet Laureate From Oklahoma," The Daily Oklahoman, November 24, 1965, p. 10.

Lieberman, Laurence, "Poetry Chronicle," The Hudson Review (Autumn 1965), pp. 455-460.

Littlejohn, David. Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1966.

Llorens, David. "Black Don Lee," Ebony, XXIV, No. 5 (March 1969), 72-80.

_____. "Seeking a New Image: Writers Converge at Fisk University," Negro Digest, XV, No. 8 (June 1966), 54-68.

Lowe, Ramona. "Poem 'Rendezvous With America' Wins Fame for Melvin Tolson," The Chicago Defender, New York Bureau, February 24, 1945.

M., S., "The Death of Simple," Newsweek (June 5, 1967), p. 104.

Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Art for All" (1862) Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters, tr. Bradford Cook (Baltimore, 1956); reprinted in "Art as Aristocratic Mystery," The Modern Tradition, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

McCall, Dan. "The Quicksilver Sparrow of M. B. Tolson," American Quarterly, XVIII, No. 3 (Fall 1966), 538-542.

Miner, Virginia Scott, "A 'Great Poet' Unknown in Our Own Midwest," The Kansas City Star, July 25, 1965.

Montgomery, Ed. "Ten State Authors Win Library Week Salute," The Sunday Oklahoman, April 16, 1967, p. 23.

Nelson, John H. and Oscar Cargill. Contemporary Trends: American Literature Since 1900. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949.

"A New Light on the Invisible," Anon. rev., Literary Supplement, London Times, November 25, 1965, p. 1049.

Newsome, Effie Lee, "Melvin B. Tolson, Rendezvous With America," The Negro College Quarterly, II, No. 4 (December 1944), 171-172.

Oliver, Clinton. "Definitive Qualities of Black Literature," Seminar, Black Heritage Week, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, February 13, 1969.

Perkins, Maxwell. Letter to M. B. Tolson, November 28, 1938.

Prattis, P. L. Pittsburgh Courier, n. d. Information among Tolson's unpublished papers.

Randall, Dudley. "Portrait of the Poet as Raconteur," Negro Digest, XV, No. 3 (January 1966), 54-57.

Review, Anon. rev., Los Angeles Times, n.d., quoted in "Wiley English Professor Writes Best Seller," Wiley [Marshall, Texas] Reporter, May, 1945.

Richardson, Jack. "The Black Arts," The New York Review of Books, XI, No. 2 (December 19, 1968), 10-13.

Rimbaud, Arthur. Letters to George Izambard and Paul Demeny (1871) Selected Verses, ed. and trans. Oliver Bernard (1962); reprinted in "The Poet as Revolutionary Seer," The Modern Tradition, eds. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

"Rites Pending for Langston Poet-Teacher," The Daily Oklahoman, August 30, 1966, p. 4.

Rodman, Selden. "On Vistas Undreamt," New York Times Book Review, LIX, No. 4 (January 24, 1954), p. 10.

Scott, Wilbur, ed. Five Approaches of Literary Criticism. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968.

Shapiro, Karl. "Decolonization of American Literature," Wilson Library Bulletin (June 1965), pp. 843-854.

- _____. "Introduction, " Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator. New York: Twayne Publishing Company, 1965.
- _____. "Melvin B. Tolson, Poet, " Book Week, New York Herald Tribune, January 10, 1965.
- Sherwood, John. "'Architect of Poetry': Harlem Poet's Epic Out 30 Years Later, " The [Washington, D. C.] Evening Star, March 31, 1965, p. E-2.
- Spector, Robert Donald. "The Poet's Voice in the Crowd, " Saturday Review (August 7, 1965), p. 29.
- Stead, C. K. The New Poetic. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964.
- "A Survey: Black Writers' Views on Literary Lions and Values, " Negro Digest, XVII, No. 3 (January 1968), 10-48, 84-89.
- Tate, Allen. "Preface, " Libretto for the Republic of Liberia. New York: Twayne Publishing Company, 1953.
- Thomas, Edward. Poetry and Drama, I, No. 1 (March 1913), 52.
- Thompson, Dolphin G. "Tolson's Gallery Brings Poetry Home, " The Negro History Bulletin, XXIX, No. 3 (December 1965), 69-70.

Thompson, Lawrance. Robert Frost, The Early Years, 1874-1915.

New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966.

Tillman, Nathaniel, "The Poet Speaks," Phylon, V, No. 4 (Winter

1944), 389-391.

Tolson, Melvin B. "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Spring Farm," Soon,

One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, ed. Herbert

Hill. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

_____. "African China"; from "Phi," (Harlem Gallery),

Kaleidoscope, ed. Robert Hayden. New York: Harcourt, Brace,

and World, Inc., 1967.

_____. "Alpha," "Beta," "Gamma," "Delta," "Epsilon,"

"Zeta," "Eta," Prairie Schooner XXXV, No. 3 (Fall 1961), pp.

243-264.

_____. "An Evening With M. B. Tolson," Lecture, Fine

Arts Week, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, April 8,

1965.

_____. "An Ex-Judge at the Bar," "Dark Symphony," and

"Psi," reprinted in Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman.

New York: The New American Library, 1968.

_____. "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake"; reprinted in
An Introduction to Literature, eds, Mary Rohrberger, Samuel H.
 Woods, Jr., and Bernard F. Dukore. New York: Random House,
 1968.

_____. "Caviar and Cabbages," Washington Tribune,
 November 26, 1938, and February 9, 1939.

_____. "Claude McKay's Art," Poetry, XXCIII (February
 1954), 287-290.

_____. "The Contributors' Column," Atlantic Monthly,
 CLXVIII, No. 3 (September, 1941), v.

_____. Conversations and classroom lectures, 1964-1966.

_____. Cuts A, B, C, and D. Manuscript for tape made
 for University of Wisconsin Educational Radio Station, March 8,
 1965.

_____. "Dark Symphony," Atlantic Monthly, CLXVIII,
 No. 3 (September 1941), 314-317.

_____. "Dark Symphony," Auch Ich Bin Amerika, ed.
 Stephan Hermlin, n. d. Information among Tolson's unpublished
 notes.

- _____ . "from Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,"
Poetry, LXXVI, No. 4 (July 1950), 208-215.
- _____ . "from 'Xi,'" (Harlem Gallery); reprinted in
Dark Symphony, eds. James Emmanuel and Theodore L. Cross.
 New York: The Free Press, 1968.
- _____ . Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator. New York:
 Twayne Publishing Company, 1965.
- _____ . "Key Words" in Harlem Gallery, 1965, Tolson's
 unpublished notes.
- _____ . "The Ladder of the Mind," Address at Arts and
 Sciences Banquet, "Oklahoma State University," Stillwater,
 Oklahoma, February, 1966.
- _____ . Libretto for the Republic of Liberia. New York:
 Twayne Publishing Company, 1953.
- _____ . "Miles to Go With Black Ulysses," Book Week,
New York Herald Tribune, III, No. 24 (February 20, 1966),
 24, 12.
- _____ . "A Poet's Odyssey," Anger, and Beyond, ed.
 Herbert Hill. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

_____. "Rendezvous With America," Common Ground
(Summer 1942), pp. 3-9.

_____. Rendezvous With America. New York: Dodd,
Mead, and Company, 1944.

_____. "The Tragedy of the Yarr Karr," The [Wiley
College] Wild Cat (1926), pp. 193-198.

_____. Unpublished letters, notebooks, and papers,
Mrs. Ruth Tolson, Washington, D. C.

_____. "Woodcuts for America: "Old Man Michael,"
"The Gallows," "The Man Inside," "When Great Dogs Fight,"
Common Ground (Spring 1943), pp. 38-43.

Tolson, Melvin B., Jr., Conversations, 1965-1969.

Tolson, Ruth, Conversations and letters, 1965-1969.

Tulip, James. "Afro-American Poet - M. B. Tolson," Poetry,
Australia, No. 10 (June 1966).

Turner, Lorenzo D. "Words for a Vast Music," Poetry, LXXXVI
(June 1955), 174-176.

Walker, Margaret. New Adventures into Poetry, n. d.

Information among Tolson's unpublished notes.

Wellek, René. Concepts of Criticism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

"What Ireland Now Offers Us," Anon. rev. Literary Digest, XLIII (October 14, 1911), 632-633.

Williams, Margaret, Notebook from English literature class taught by M. B. Tolson at Langston University, 1964-65.

Wilson, Charles M. Liberia. New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1947.

Wilson, Helen Tolson, Conversation, August, 1967.

Winters, Yvor, "The Significance of The Bridge by Hart Crane," In Defense of Reason. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1947.

APPENDIX A

The Tragedy of the Yarr Karr

By Melvin Beaunorus Tolson

O'er the scorching Afric plains

Flows a yellow river;

He who wanders down her banks,

Lo, returneth never.

Spirits of an Evil Fate,

They that souls dissever,

Seek to lure the traveler on,

Past the tarn of Phraver.

Allah, save me, thy slave,

From the Yarr Karr River!

The moon, a golden disc, flung its mantling splendor over sculpturesque escarpments and undulating stretches of sand. Clusters of stars blended their silvery sheen with sapphire skies. Ever and anon the sepulchral silence was broken by the howl of a hyena in the distance, the periodic snore of a sleeper, or the impatient neigh of a cavalry horse tethered in the camp. A pleasant breeze touched the brows of the sleeping soldiers, and winged its way toward the

enveloping hush of the east. All day the men had ridden hard, and now their tired bodies were wrapt in the Lethean shroud of sleep. Peace--silence--forgetfulness--dreams--illimitable expanses of sand, and Northern Africa at midnight.

Suddenly the night was awake with terror! Volley after volley of death poured upon the sleepers. Scintillating rapiers and scimitars sought vulnerable spots with that lightning precision which is the result of sedulous training. Eviscerating cries, diabolical ecstasies and terrible groans mingled in mad confusion. Never shall I forget that night of unutterable tragedy and startling vicissitude. Although years have passed, I sometimes spring from my bed in the dead of night, overwhelmed by dreams, horrible dreams, that torment my innermost soul.

The picture will not fade--change of scenes will not obliterate it. My imagination is conjured! As I write, the past unfolds before my tortured mind, and kaleidoscopic shapes stand forth in stark realism. Again it is midnight--midnight in Northern Africa!

I hear the sudden volley. I see the maddened host of nomadic Arabs charging upon the camp of the English. Curses and prayers smite the turbulent air. What is more horrible than a curse falling from the lips of the dying? As I write, my blood is chilled by the cry of the fiendish Islamite, "Allah! Allah! Mahomet, the Prophet!"

Their voices are raucous and hoarse. Dusky visages, mirroring the fury of demonism, shine in the astral gloaming. There is the

the rattle of accoutrements. Riderless horses gallop hither and thither. An Arab horseman, with one stroke of his damaskeened scimitar, decapitates an English soldier; another transfixes a Britisher with his gleaming lance. Waves of the followers of Islam sweep over the blood-soaked field. Hatred and religious fanaticism demand their dreadful toll. The scene beggars description

Life is a chain of cause-and-effect. A series of episodes and circumstances antedate that fierce encounter on the billowy sands of Northern Africa. Again, my sanguine temperament had its place in the quixotic escapades of my checkered youth. From the apriori viewpoint, I shall review briefly the casual [sic] forces and events that led up to the tragic scene I have attempted to depict.

[The story continues with the narrator telling of his past, then of his capture by the Arabs and of his falling in love with Bellah, a beautiful Arabian maiden with whom he eloped to the banks of the Yarr Karr River.]

. . . She sprang up lightly and kissed me; then whirling suddenly, she began to dance that bizarre dance which her people call "The Dance of Love." All the fire and passion and art of generations of Arabian maidens was thrown into the ecstasy of that romantic dance. I was fascinated. I could have gazed for hours. Suddenly she stopped and curtsied.

"My lord," she smiled, "I shall take my nocturnal swim in the Yarr Karr."

"Very well, my princess," I answered; for after a fatiguing journey of the day, Bellah would take what she called her "nocturnal swim."

I lay down on the sand to await her return. The Yarr Karr was distant about fifty yards. The desert was bathed in a refulgent starry radiance. Silence enveloped the boundless stretches of the night. Out of the gloaming came the musical murmuring of the Yarr Karr. Again and again the relaxation of the moment, my soul felt that peace and buoyancy which serve as a balm to the spirit. Oh, the blissfulness of love! Gradually, a faint sleep embraced me; my mind, seated in the shallop of roseate dreams, drifted out upon the sea of forgetfulness.

Suddenly I was startled by an eviscerating scream, a scream of terror. I bounded to my feet, shaking as one with ague. Again, that heart-rending cry pierced the echoless night. I raced into the darkness. My heart was in my mouth. Fear added wings to my flight. I reached the banks of the fateful Yarr Karr. I picked up Bellah's garments, which were lying on the bank. Again and again and again I called into the night. I cursed myself for carelessness. I plunged into the murky waters of the sepulchral Yarr Karr, and swam until I was paralyzed with exhaustion. I ran like a madman up and down the bank.

"Bellah! Bellah!" I vociferated: and the grim echoes of the night reverberated the cries of my stricken soul. Thereafter, I do not

recollect what happened. My mind became a blank.

I was caught by some English soldiers several days later. They say they found me haggard and clothesless wandering over the desert sands repeating, "Bellah, Bellah." I know nothing of this. The first thing that I remembered, after the tragedy of the Yarr Karr, was my reclining in bed in a hospital in Cairo, Egypt. It took months for me to convalesce. When I was able, the army officers shipped me to England. In London, I was placed under the great alienist, Dr. Earnest McNaster. He was sympathetic and resourceful. He said that the calamitous shock had produced hypochondria. He called it "soul-shock."

Years have passed. I have attempted to forget. I am now a mission worker in the slums of an eastern city of my native land. I am ministering to the broken souls of men who, like myself, have suffered from "soul-shock." But ever there flows through the vast expanse of consciousness the yellow waters of the fateful Yarr Karr; and ever, in my dreams, I see the bizarre and lovely figure of Bellah, my Bellah, dancing the "dance of love"--there in the golden moonlight on the sands of Northern Africa.

From Wiley [Marshall, Texas] College The Wild Cat (1926),
pp. 193-198.

APPENDIX B

Decolonization of American Literature

. . . Our century is very great because with us all the chickens have come to roost, because great men of goodwill, statesmen, presidents, leaders of men, artists, and young people, have demanded the exaction of promises made to nations by visionaries and the spokesmen of freedom. This is happening under our eyes: we are all a party to it. Nostalgia is obsolete. Assimilation may well be. Neither is of vital importance. I prefer the idea of negritude. At least it is the first great idea or concept that can deal with the biggest fact of modern life without trying to water it down.

I will give three examples: Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and M. B. Tolson. Césaire is a Caribbean, Senghor is a Senegalese, and Tolson was born in Missouri. The first two use French for poetry; Tolson uses English or American. (My designation of Tolson's language is that he writes in Negro.)

Or rather, all three of these great poets write in Negro. That is what negritude means in literature. It does not mean accommodation to the standards of the settler or to his nostalgia for the mother or father country. It does not mean making peace through disappearance

into the scene; nor, as Senghor has shown so nobly in his political writings, does it mean war. It means insistence on the pride of selfhood without hatred. No oppressed people in history has had less sense of revenge than the Negro. Retribution is not Negro.

Negritude is simply decolonization under the positive aspect. Senghor has no grudge against the Tradition (as I do) or against modern technology. On the contrary, he welcomes everything which will make possible the greater harmony among men. This is the wisdom of the French in the decolonized man, the daring of the French to push an idea into action as far as it will go. There are, I believe, no African poets of the English language of his stature. The English are still the heirs of apartheid.

.

I know of only one American poet whose genius and experience even approaches the concept: M. B. Tolson. And Tolson knows that the concept is different with us. In American culture, according to the groundrules, there can be no separatism even by race and color. What then? Is there a long road of assimilation and miscegenation ahead? Can there be an American negritude?

.

. The fact that Tolson's Libretto is known by white traditionalists gives the lie to the critic's [Tate's] assertion that Tolson has

risen above Negro experience to become an "artist." The facts are that Tolson is a dedicated revolutionist who revolutionizes modern poetry in a language of American negritude. The forms of the Libretto and of Harlem Gallery, far from being "traditional," are the Negro satire upon the poetic tradition of the Eliots and Tates. The tradition cannot stand being satirized and lampooned and so tries to kick an authentic poet upstairs into the oblivion of acceptance. But the Negro artist won't stay in the attic anymore than he stayed in the cellar. As Tolson says in his new poem:

the Great White World
 and the Black Bourgeoisie
 have shoved the Negro artist into
 the white and not-white dichotomy,
 the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts--
 the dialectic of
 to be or not to be
 a Negro.

From Karl Shapiro, Wilson Library Bulletin (June 1965), 852-853.

VITA

Neva Joy Flasch

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: MELVIN B. TOLSON: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Major Field: Higher Education

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Denison, Texas, March 23, 1932, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Childers.

Education: Graduated from Cobb High School, Durant, Oklahoma, in May, 1948; attended Southeastern State College, 1948-1951, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Education in May, 1951; attended Oklahoma State University in 1952, 1953-1954, graduating with a Master of Arts Degree in English in 1954; attended University of Colorado summer of 1955; attended Oklahoma State University as a part-time student in 1965; attended Oklahoma State University on a Title III grant from Langston University in 1966-1967; completed requirements for the Doctor of Education Degree in Higher Education with emphasis in English at Oklahoma State University in May, 1969.

Professional Experience: English and physical education teacher, Ardmore High School, 1951-1953; graduate teaching assistant in English, Oklahoma State University, 1953-1954; English instructor, Oklahoma State University, 1954-1960, 1961-1962; English instructor, Langston University, 1963-1965; assistant professor of English, Langston University, 1966-1968; associate professor of English, Langston University, 1968-1969.